

A Queen of
Hearts for the
Duke

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Love games can be tricky, even if you hold the winning hand

Lisa Campell

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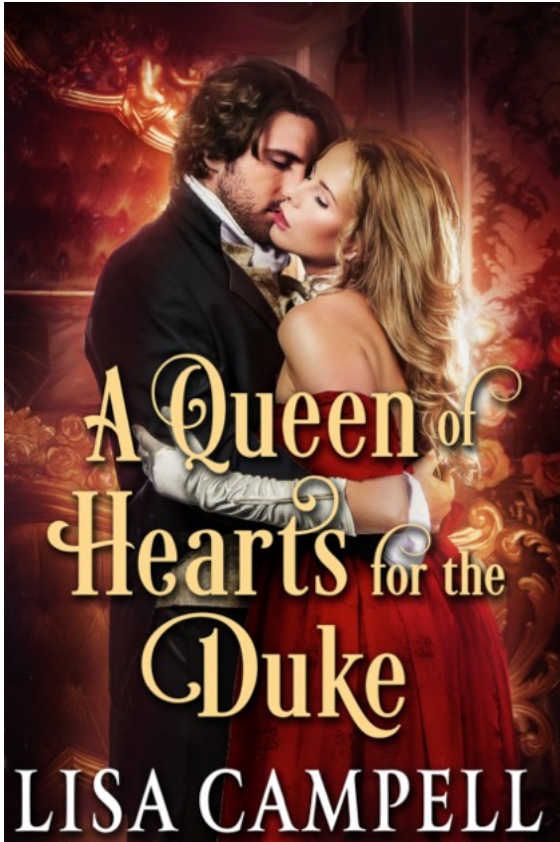
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About the Author

Thank you

I want to personally thank you for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me. It's a blessing to have the opportunity to share with you, my passion for writing, through my stories.

About the book



A game of hearts is a dangerous game to play, as hearts do break.

If Lady Verity Huxley doesn't marry soon... she will **lose everything**. Following her father's sudden death, an **ultimatum** came from the lips of her stepmother: "marry, or your mother's virtue will be put to question and so your fortune."

Her best option for marriage is her **childhood friend**, Christian, despite that she has always been **secretly in love** with his older brother, Jack. But with Jack being away, leading a **roguish life** in

Europe, that is not going to be a problem. Or is it?

Jack Gladstone, the notorious **Jack of Hearts**, returns back to London to assume his duties as the Duke of Sussex, where he finds his younger brother ready to make a marriage arrangement.

How odd it was that the day he would meet his brother's future wife, would be the day that he kisses her!

Yet a **flower bouquet** to the wrong recipient and a **scandalous walk** at a ball seems to be enough to keep them apart...

Jack has to figure out his feelings fast as another woman will come to shuffle the cards and play with his heart...

Love games can be tricky, even if you hold the winning hand...



Chapter One

“Verity! Come and look at this ribbon Clara has gifted me!”

Verity pulled her gaze away from the elegant view of the garden and smiled as she responded to her best friend’s call. Lady Shona sat in the middle of the room, smiling happily amongst gifts and the soft pastels of her friends’ gowns. Her pale skin was flushed with the excitement of her engagement party, her freckles standing out on her rosy cheeks. Verity smiled at seeing her look so happy. She took the blue-ribbon Shona held out to her and immediately tied it into Shona’s light brown curls.

“It is perfect for your eyes,” Verity said sincerely. “You will make the most beautiful bride.”

The other women tittered their agreement. Even though Shona was not the most beautiful woman out in society, she was marrying a man of good standing whom she loved. She glowed with joy and anyone could see it.

“Lord Addington is a lucky man!” Verity squeezed her friend’s shoulder gently.

“My lady? A letter sent express for you.” A finely dressed servant appeared at Verity’s elbow, carrying a tightly folded envelope on a silver platter.

“Who might have sent that?” Shona asked, glancing up from a new set of lace doilies she had been gifted.

“I believe it came from London, my lady.”

Verity heard the curious murmurs of the ladies around her - as the

only lady of the party visiting from London, they saw her as something of an exotic bird and a letter sent express was delightful fodder for the gossip mill. Feeling their eyes on her, she smiled politely.

“Excuse me, ladies, it must be from my father.”

She crossed to the privacy of the garden room, standing among the rich green leaves and bright, waxy petals. Her father and stepmother had spent much of the summer season in Bath, hoping the benefit of the healing waters would improve her father's ailing health. They had only recently returned to London. An express letter so soon could only be bad news. Verity took a deep breath and broke the seal.

Daughter,

Your father's condition has worsened. I fear he will not see out the week. If you desire to speak with him before he meets the Lord, I suggest you return home post-haste.

Your loving mother,

The marchioness.

Verity crumpled the letter in her hand. It was not from her mother, but her stepmother and it was just like Martina to write such a brief, unfeeling letter. Verity's true mother had died when she was only a small child, her father was the only family she had left and now ill-health threatened to steal him away too. Without him, she would be alone in the world aside from Martina who, even though she signed her notes as “loving mother,” was incapable of loving anything but the money and title she had achieved in marrying Verity's father.

Verity glanced back over her shoulder to the crowd of happy young women in the drawing-room. She dearly wanted to share this news with Shona, desperate for her tender understanding and the consolation of her friendship, but propriety held her back. This was an important day for Shona. Verity knew that being inducted into Bristol society and meeting the female acquaintances of her future husband had been worrying for her. Verity didn't want to pull her attention away at this crucial time. Instead, she found herself longing for the company of her only other dear friends - the Gladstone brothers. Christian was her closest friend in London and could always be relied

on for sound advice, and Jack, well, Verity's heart skipped a little when she thought of Jack. Charming and handsome, she had always harboured an affection for the older Gladstone brother even though she knew his flirtatious nature meant his sentiments couldn't be sincere. How she wished he was here now to comfort her. She imagined how relieving it would feel to fall into his arms. But Jack was far away, touring Europe in the company of other young gentlemen, and Christian was in London. She was alone.

Squaring her shoulders, she dropped the hurtful note in a plant pot and turned back to the drawing-room, readying herself to give her apologies and leave. There would be shocked faces, Shona's veiled disappointment and of course, gossip. She took a steadying breath, blinking against the tears that threatened to rise. She needed to be strong for her father and pray that she would get back in time to see his face one last time.

Chapter Two

Jack watched as an elegant, dark-haired beauty crossed the Spanish steps, her white carousel resting gently on her lace-covered shoulder. She caught his eye, smiling coquettishly from across the water feature until her chaperone hurried her away. Jack kept his eyes on her, waiting for her to glance back over her shoulder for one last smile, as they always did.

“Are you distracted, Gladstone?”

Jack smiled at his friend, shaking his head lightly. “A pair of bright eyes only.”

He tapped the end of his cigar in the glass dish on the table, sinking back into his chair under the awning of Cafe Greco. Jack was used to this type of attention from the ladies, and his tour of Europe had not lessened the glances, smiles and fluttering of fans in his direction. Increasingly, however, he found the process to be less and less rewarding. In fact, more frequently he found his mind turning to the faces of his childhood, the ladies he had grown up with and saw not only as pretty faces but as dear friends, although he was not sure they would see him the same way.

His younger brother, Christian, was the one who had the knack of maintaining meaningful, respectful friendships with ladies. Jack thought with envy of Christian’s close friendship with the charming Lady Verity Huxley, a green-eyed beauty whom Jack had always found arresting. Jack enjoyed her company immensely, looked forward to the way her eyes lit up and cheeks flushed when he complimented her or beat her at cards, but these were superficialities only. It was Christian who had the true knowledge of that lovely girl’s heart. For a moment, he found himself wondering where Verity was right now. He imagined her on one of her long walks with Christian,

the sunshine catching her strawberry blonde hair and the lush greenery of the English garden reflected in her emerald eyes. He felt a sudden pang of homesickness.

“Signor? C’è una lettera per te.”

A young Italian waiter placed a silver plate beside him, a small coffee pot and a letter laid out on it. Like many gentlemen travellers in Rome, Jack was bouncing between accommodations with wealthy Italian friends and so used the Cafe Greco as a central post office.

“Grazie.” Jack turned the letter over. With a lurch of his heart, he saw the edging of the envelope was mourners black. He recognised his brother’s seal.

“Another love letter?”

Jack’s friends laughed, nudging each other and glancing curiously at the unopened missive. Jack pushed back his chair abruptly, grinding his cigar into the ashtray.

“Excuse me.”

He set off walking at a rapid pace, leaving his friends and their exclamations behind him. The Roman sun beat against the back of his neck. He knew what this letter would contain, and he couldn’t bear to read it in public. Finally, he found a quiet back street. Holding himself tense with trepidation, he broke his brother’s seal.

Dear brother,

You will know the contents of this letter before you read it, but the dreadful task of giving you this news still falls to me. Our father is dead. Though it was expected, and we can take solace that he is finally at peace with the Lord, I confess myself overwhelmed. It is not only my own grief I feel, but I am saddened to share that the Marquess of Huxley has also passed. It is torturous to see Verity’s suffering at the loss of a beloved father. Only we, brother, can truly know how she feels. It would be my greatest wish to tell you that you could continue your European tour, but it is impossible. Mother demands that you must return and take control of the estate and assume your rightful place as the Duke of Sussex.

I hope that this letter finds you quickly, and you can return in time for

Father's funeral. I will anxiously await your arrival. There are many preparations to be made.

Your loving brother,

Christian

Jack watched the ink blur and run against the paper, and realised tears were sliding off his nose. His father was dead, and his days of freedom and exploration were over. He must go home and take up the mantle of his Dukedom and all the responsibility that came with it. He could already feel the weight of it pressing down on his shoulders and his mind filled with all the questions he should have asked his father about managing their land and tenants. Now they would never have those conversations. He was alone.

He took a heavy breath and wiped his eyes on the rough wool of his coat sleeve. He would not be alone for long. His brother was at home, and his mother too, and they would give him the support and comfort he craved. A small voice in the back of his head cut through his grief and reminded him Verity Huxley was also at home. She was mourning too, and with the loss of her only family would undoubtedly be looking to Christian to provide the necessary support, which meant there was a chance that Jack might see her. Just to look at her face, to see that sparkling joyful smile would surely lessen the darkness that seemed to shroud him. Jack found his heart slightly lighter at the prospect.

Chapter Three

Verity stood as quietly as her maid, Trudy gently did up the pearl buttons of her mourning dress. She stared at herself in the long mirror, as if she were watching a doll. Her strawberry blonde hair was pulled back severely so that her black mourning veil could be pinned securely. Her black dress was a heavy velvet, unlike the light cotton and muslin that was so fashionable nowadays. It made her look pale and wan. She could barely recognise herself.

“Are you alright, miss?” Trudy murmured, squeezing Verity’s arm.

“I will be fine.”

She wouldn’t be. Today was the day of the funeral. Verity had not been able to see her father before he passed away. She had stumbled from the carriage after a non-stop ride from Bristol, torn into the Huxley townhouse like a tornado only to be confronted by the impassive face of her stepmother.

“You are too late,” she had said, carelessly, ignoring Verity’s strangled cry. “You shouldn’t have gone to Bristol.”

As always, Martina had no thought for how her words might impact Verity and turned away from her brimming tears and devastated face to return to her sewing without another word. Since then, the two women had kept a wide berth from one another. The Marchioness had been spending most of her time with her daughter from her first marriage, Lady Daniella Law, whom Verity always found intimidating because of her beauty and aloof manner. In looks she took after her mother, sharing the sharp, red hair and flawless skin that Martina flaunted around London.

According to Trudy, Martina and Daniella had been seen at several

public functions since her father's death and although they both wore the appropriate mourning black and seemed subdued, Verity felt the insult to her father's memory that they were out in society again so soon. Verity, by comparison, had been unable to face any callers. Flowers and food had been delivered every day, but whilst Martina took the gifts immediately, Verity squirrelled away the cards and handwritten notes and wept over their kind words in her bedchamber. It had taken more strength than she had to get out of bed this morning and prepare for one of the worst days of her life. The only solace she could take was that Christian would be in attendance at the funeral. She needed a friendly face to get her through.

"Verity, we need to have a little talk."

Verity turned to see her stepmother standing in the doorway to her dressing room, holding an enormous peacock fan. It matched the gold and black stitching on her skirt. It was shockingly inappropriate for a funeral.

"Yes, mother?"

Verity's voice always caught painfully on the word "mother." For her father's sake, she had always complied, but it pained her to say it. Martina's eyes were like chips of blue ice, narrowing slightly as she noticed the catch in Verity's tone.

"I am afraid we have a small problem, my dear. I found this in your father's things. I'm afraid it has rather shone a bright light on some dark doings that impact you."

Martina smiled and pulled a small, leather-bound journal from behind her back. Trudy gasped. Verity instantly recognised it as her father's diary. It was incredibly private, had been kept in a locked drawer of his desk and only he had kept the key. He had always told Verity that, upon his death, the diary was supposed to be burnt without being read. Martina knew this, Verity was sure of it.

"You - you read it?" Verity stared at Martina.

"Well of course," Martina flipped indolently through the pages. "Your father was my husband."

"But - but he wanted it burned, you know he did -,"

“And with good reason, it seems. He had many secrets to keep, especially concerning your mother.”

“My mother?” Verity stared at Martina, flexing her fingers to control her rage. “I do not think you should speak of my mother, Martina.”

Martina clearly noticed the change in Verity’s address. She stood a little straighter.

“I can speak of her as I like. I am your father’s widow, I can speak of any part of his life as I wish. You are nothing.”

“I am his daughter!” Verity exclaimed.

“Well, perhaps not.” Martina waved the journal. “It is suggested here that your mother, the woman he always spoke of as such a saint, may have been unfaithful.”

Verity’s head was spinning. She felt Trudy’s firm, comforting grip on her elbow, silently supporting and holding her up in the face of such terrible accusations. She could not think about this now, she could not consider the idea that the man she had grown up with, loved and cherished might not be her father. She needed to be strong in the face of Martina’s malice.

“This is hearsay,” Verity’s voice shook with rage. “Why you should desire to make it known is beyond me, for it will only damage our families-,”

“It is not only hearsay, and I have little concern for your life since you are likely a bastard child and are owed nothing.” Martina’s eyes glittered with hate. “Your father has recorded more than his own suspicions. He includes in here a letter between your mother and her lover, no doubt that he uncovered and wept over since he loved her so. Why else should he have kept you?”

Because he loved me, Verity thought silently, *I know he did.* She knew that those words would only enrage Martina, who although had been treated well by her father, had not been loved in the same way Verity had.

“Do you think you will be untainted if you make this - this slander known publicly?” Verity tried to reason. “You rely on the good name

of my father, why would you make designs against it?"

"Because I have a need of you, Verity, and I know you are headstrong underneath your innocence. I believe a promise of my silence on these matters will engender your compliance."

"What could you possibly need of me that you would threaten these - these dreadful things?"

"You must marry by the end of the season."

Martina's demand seemed to fill the room, resoundingly painful and crashing over Verity like a wave. She could say nothing. There was no need anyway, for Verity instantly understood what Martina wanted. If Verity married, she would forfeit her entire claim on her father's estate. Everything would go to Martina. In the absence of the Marquess' full devotion, she was clearly determined to possess what was left of him completely.

"I understand." Verity turned away from her stepmother, trying not to blink so as to hold the tears back.

"You will be married by the end of the season?"

"And you will keep my parents' secrets. Yes, we are understood. Now," Verity nodded for Trudy to bring her veil. "Please excuse me. I must prepare for my father's funeral."

"Of course, dear." Martina's pleasant and charming exterior had clipped back into place. "Take your time."

As soon as the door shut, Trudy threw her arms around Verity, crushing her in a bone-breaking hug.

"Oh, mistress! You - you were so composed, she - she -," Trudy dashed a hand across her face, wiping tears. "She is a beast of a woman to say such things to you!"

"I know, Trudy."

Verity disentangled herself from Trudy, biting her lip to control her stormy emotions. She dearly wanted to collapse into her maid's arms

and weep, but she knew the funeral carriage with the dark horses and their black-feathered plumes were waiting on the road downstairs. There was a mahogany coffin laden with white carnations lying solemnly somewhere, waiting to be interred. Today was the day she would bury her father, and now she needed to find a husband.

“What will you do, Miss?”

“I don’t know.” Verity adjusted her veil. “I - I will have to accept an offer, I suppose.”

In the last year, she knew her father had been approached multiple times with offers from well-known London gentlemen for her hand in marriage.

Trudy frowned. “Your father did not feel any of those gentlemen were worthy of you.”

“Their worthiness is immaterial when considered against Martina’s threat,” Verity flipped her veil down, glad to be able to hide her face. “I will not let her diminish my parents’ memories this way.”

Verity tried to push away the thought that her father might not be her father and pulled on her black lace gloves.

“Well, what of Lord Gladstone?”

“Jack?” Verity’s heart skipped a beat to mention his name.

“No, the younger Lord Gladstone not the new Duke of Sussex.” Trudy held out the cropped, black jacket for Verity to wear. “He cares for you tenderly. I am sure he would be open to an ...arrangement.”

Verity slid her arms into the jacket and let Trudy button it, considering her words. Christian was her closest friend in London now that Shona had settled into life in Bristol. The idea that he might love her was out of the question. Christian had never given her any signs that what he felt for her was more than brotherly affection, but he was a true friend and would help her if she needed him.

“Trudy, run down and tell them I will need five minutes more. Tell them I am looking for the handkerchief father gave me.”

Trudy nodded, curtsied and left. Verity crossed to her writing desk and set pen to paper. Her hand was shaking so badly, the nib scratched and jumped so that the ink spurted on the page. The idea of throwing herself on the charity of a friend in order to secure a marriage was incredibly embarrassing to her. With each word she wrote, she felt her dream of falling in love, courting, receiving a proposal and marrying the perfect gentleman disintegrated. In its place, she tried to rationalise a happy life with her best friend as her husband. They would love each other, of course, and he would be kind to her, but there would be no romance between them. Yet it would surely be better than the humiliation of being called a bastard child and turned out of society. Still, as Verity signed her note requesting an audience with him and wrote Christian's title on the front, she imagined what it would be like if she were addressing this note to Jack instead. For a brief moment, she felt a soft flicker of joy. She closed her eyes and shook her head sharply. This was not the time for dreams. Her father was dead, her stepmother had no care for her and the burden of protecting her family's honour was on her shoulders alone. Now was the time for practicality. She sealed the letter, slipped it into her pocket and put all thoughts of love from her mind.

Chapter Four

“Thank you, darling,” Jack’s mother said softly, as Jack offered the Duchess of Sussex his arm for a turn around the garden. Christian fell into step beside them, and the little family began to stroll slowly along the gravel path toward the rose garden of the Gladstone estate. There were a trio in a procession where once they would have been two pairs: a loving couple and their two sons. Despite the awareness of this new formation and everything they were missing, they walked in easy silence, the Duchess flanked by her two sons; Jack, dark and athletic, with black, sparkling eyes like his mother and Christian, fairer and leaner, not as tall as his brother but with a studious, gentle air that mimicked his father.

When Jack looked at Christian, he was struck by his late father’s eyes staring back at him. It was comforting, but also a little unsettling. Jack knew Christian felt the same, whenever he smiled or laughed. He couldn’t imagine how painful it was for their mother, to see her late husband again and again, in the faces of her sons.

“Thank you for coming home in time for the funeral, Jack.” the Duchess said, squeezing his arm.

“Of course, mother.”

“I am only sorry you could not attend the Marquess’ funeral. Christian attended on our behalf.”

“How was Lady Huxley?”

It felt strange to Jack to call Verity by her title when in his mind he had always called her by her Christian name. But she was Christian’s acquaintance, not his, and his mother would surely notice if he began to speak of her too familiarly.

“As well as can be, considering the circumstances. She will be coming for dinner this Friday.”

The Duchess frowned. “Is it appropriate for her to be visiting so soon after her father’s passing?”

“She actually has something to discuss with me, I believe. Her maid gave me a note at the funeral. I thought it would be more suitable to extend an invitation rather than to call at the house. They are only ladies there now.”

The Duchess nodded approvingly. “Well done, Christian. That is very true, and imminently suitable. It brings me to a subject I should like to discuss with you.”

The Duchess stopped at the rose garden gazebo, sheltering from the wind under the metal frame and climbing trellises.

“What is it, mother?”

The Duchess arranged her black skirts around her carefully, her lined face dragged down with grief yet still holding the grace of her youth. Jack and Christian glanced at each other, questioning eyebrows lifted. Neither of them knew what was coming.

“My dear sons, the passing of your father has made many things clear to me. In his final days, he spoke often of how he longed to see your marriages, your children, the future of our family. It was a great sadness to me that I couldn’t comfort him with assurances that you would soon be entering into matrimony.”

The Duchess looked at them both imploringly, eyes filled with unshed tears. “I do not want to go to my grave with the same regrets.”

“Mother, you are the picture of health,” Jack protested. “How can you possibly think...?”

“I am not a young woman,” The Duchess cut him off with a wave of her hand. “I will not wait for an eternity for my sons to settle down. I want to see you both wed, and soon.”

Christian and Jack exchanged a sceptical look. Jack knew that

Christian had previously been as uninterested in marriage as he had, perhaps more so. Christian had, since a young age, been very guarded with his heart and philosophical about the concept of marriage. After all, as the second son, he had none of the pressures to ensure the Gladstone line and could afford to have a more modern approach to partnership. Clearly, it would take a unique lady to catch his eye, since he had spent his whole life on intimate grounds with Verity Huxley and had never expressed romantic affection towards her. Their mother, however, had not noticed her son's unorthodox ideas or the nature of his friendship with Verity.

“Christian, you have made a good start with Lady Huxley. Your familiarity with her makes her a very suitable match for you.”

“Mother, Verity is grieving, it is hardly appropriate -,”

“Of course it is,” the Duchess’ voice was sharp. “The young woman is without a father, without a mother. Of course, she will be looking for a husband now.”

Christian stared at Jack in amazement, but Jack shrugged helplessly. He was reminded that his mother had spent her entire life living under the beady eye of London society. She saw the world in terms of matches to be made and situations to be advanced.

“As for you -,” Jack tried to look appropriately contrite as his mother’s intent gaze fell on him. “You have spent long enough sowing wild oats on the continent.”

“Mother!”

“Now, now.” She smiled craftily. “Don’t think you can hide such things from me. Why do you think your father suggested the Grand Tour? A young man must explore and grow into his manhood before he settles into his title, but that time is past.”

“I understand, mother.”

“You are the heir to all of this,” she gestured over the grand gardens, the marble pillars of Gladstone hall, the rolling hills of their estate and the tall trees of the surrounding woods. “You are responsible for many lives, and the way to assure the livelihood of all our employees, the safety of our tenants and that our legacy continues is to do one thing

alone - marry. Continue the line. It is what your father most wanted.”

Her voice trembled over her last words. Christian stepped to her side, pressing his hands over hers. She smiled tremulously, kissing his knuckles. Christian’s bottom lip trembled. Jack blinked, trying not to let his emotions get the most of him. They stood in silence, letting the sound of the breeze through the rose bushes and the soft bleating of the lambs in the farmers’ fields wash over them.

Finally, Jack felt he had enough self-control to speak. “I understand, mother. I - I won’t let you down.” He swallowed hard. “Or father.”

The Duchess smiled gently. “Thank you, dear. I think I should return to the house now. Come, Christian.”

Christian threw him a supportive glance before offering his arm to his mother and escorting her back up the gravel path. Jack waited until they had turned the corner and were hidden by the high hedges of the sculpture garden, then slumped onto the bench, his head in his hands. Everything felt like it was moving too fast.

It wasn’t that Jack was opposed to marriage, in fact, of late he had found himself daydreaming of what life would be like with a partner by his side. But when he looked at the grand vistas of the Gladstone estate, he tried to imagine how it would feel with a wife by his side. Someone to walk the rose garden with him, to sit here, under the trellises in summer and to host summer parties for his dignified friends.

It was a pretty picture, but it seemed so far away, like a distant dream. He could imagine having a wife might be pleasant, but who on earth would she be? He didn’t know if there was anyone in all of London who was ready for the great task of ruling the Gladstone estate with him. Yet, when he considered it, he had to admit that the woman in his daydreams bore a remarkable similarity to his brother’s best and closest friend: Verity Huxley.

Chapter Five

Christian looked across the parlour at his best friend, Verity Huxley, trying to work out what was wrong. For the first time since her father's death, Verity was not wearing her mourning clothes. She was wearing a dark blue gown made of silk and velvet with gold trimmings. It suited her beautifully, making her soft, slightly coppery curls shine brightly. But she looked unhappy to be wearing it, continually tugging at the elbow-length sleeves and when Christian had given her a compliment she had blushed as if shamed and looked away. After several long moments of uncomfortably sipping from their wine glasses, Christian decided to take the bull by the horns.

"All right, out with it." Christian set his glass down and pulled his chair closer to Verity's, so he was within arm's reach of her. "What on earth is the matter?"

"What do you mean?" Verity avoided his eye, taking a long sip.

"Don't pretend," Christian frowned and gently reached forward, taking Verity's glass from her and holding her satin gloved hands. "Now. Talk to me."

She sighed heavily, closing her eyes and straightening her back as if preparing for battle. "I have something to ask you."

"Of course."

Christian stared at her, unable to think of what she could possibly need of him that she was so afraid to ask. He had never seen her so awkward.

"Will you marry me?"

“What?” Christian laughed but then, seeing Verity’s eyes begin to fill with tears and her bottom lip tremble stopped immediately. “You’re ... you’re in earnest?”

“I am. Are - are you refusing me?”

“Am I -?” He stared at her, watching for signs of humour in her face or manner, but saw none. “Of - of course not. I - I am very flattered, but are you quite well?”

“I am well, thank you.”

Verity wouldn’t meet his eye. It was not like her to keep secrets from him, or hide her feelings, but he knew she must be.

“I do not think you are well,” he said quietly. “I think you are overwhelmed with the death of your father, and you believe this might provide stability for you, but you do not need to marry me for that. I shall always be here for you.”

“It is not that.” She shook her head, eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“Then what?”

He waited in silence, watching her face. She looked positively rigid with tension and worry, and very pale as if she hadn’t slept well since the funeral. None of those things explained why his best friend in the whole world, who he loved closer than a sister and whom he knew thought of him as a brother, was proposing to him. Something was very wrong.

“Come, Verity.” He squeezed her hands gently. “Speak to me as a friend and please, look at me.”

Reluctantly, she lifted her familiar green eyes to his. As soon as their eyes met, her face crumpled, and the tears fell. “Oh, Christian,” she whispered. “I am so sorry to do this to you, but I am in earnest. I - I need to get married.”

“Why?”

“It’s my stepmother, she’s - she’s forcing me to marry by the end of the

season.”

“Why?” Christian frowned. The Marchioness was known for her desire to advance herself in society, but Verity was a very eligible woman, made more eligible by the death of her father. Any family member should be trying to ensure a suitable match who was worthy of her, not pushing her to be hasty.

“She uncovered some ... documentation that suggests -,” Verity closed her eyes as if the words were painful, “that suggests I am illegitimate.”

Christian’s jaw dropped. The idea that Verity Huxley was not her father’s daughter was like trying to say the sun did not rise in the east.

“That’s absurd!” He held Verity’s arms. “You don’t believe it, do you?”

Verity shook her head. “I don’t know what to think anymore. She has the written proof, she -,”

“Have you seen it?” Christian’s quick, able mind was already running through the ways he could discredit the Marchioness’ claim.

“No, and it does not matter.” Verity sighed. “She has told me she will make her discoveries public if I do not comply. I can’t do that to my parents’ memories, Christian.” She looked up at him with such pain his own heart hurt. “I just can’t.”

“I understand.”

He did understand. If anything threatened to dishonour the memory of his father, he would have done anything in his power, used all his available resources to prevent it. Verity smiled tremulously, wiping her eyes. “I knew you would, I was just so ashamed.”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” Christian said, vehemently. Her stepmother, on the other hand...

“So, will you think about it? Marrying me?”

Christian took a deep breath. All his life, Verity had been by his side. Since they were children, she had been his confidante, the person who made him laugh the most, the one with whom he wanted to share his

highs and lows and yet he had never wanted to marry her. He didn't want to marry anyone. If Verity, a woman whom Christian was sure encompassed the best of all women, could not move him to marriage he doubted any woman could. Yet he would do anything for her, and the idea that her stepmother would try and cut her out of her heritage made him seethe.

In his heart, he knew that accepting Verity's offer would not be the right thing for her either. She had shown very little interest in gentlemen growing up, in fact, the only other man she had been remotely open with aside from Christian was his own brother. Verity deserved a man who would love her with all the passion of a million lifetimes, and though he would die for his friend, he knew he wasn't that man. Still, he couldn't see another way. Not at the moment.

"Yes," he smiled tightly, and was gratified when Verity's shoulders sagged in relief. "Yes, I will consider it, and I will be here for you... whatever you need."

She blinked hard. "Thank you, Christian. You - you are a true friend."

"Yes, I am." Christian smiled ruefully and was delighted when Verity laughed, as he had hoped she would. "Now, come with me. I have a surprise for you."

"Oh?" She took his arm, her eyes bright with interest again.

"Yes indeed. We have someone joining us for supper tonight."

He walked her to the dining room and watched Verity out the corner of his eye as his surprise was revealed. He saw her face go blank for a moment, then it was as if she was being lit from golden light inside. She glowed. Christian smiled to himself. His long-held suspicions had been correct. Verity might not realise it yet, but another Gladstone brother might be the answer to all her problems.

"Verity," he said softly. "You will remember my older brother, Jack Gladstone?"

Chapter Six

Verity could not concentrate on what the Duchess was saying.

Every time she spoke, Verity's eyes inevitably drifted to the tall, handsome man sitting across from her. Jack Gladstone had become only more striking in the four years since Verity had last laid eyes on him. His skin was darker from the Italian sun, taking on an olive tone that complimented his dark eyes and his hair seemed longer and more luscious. She immediately imagined what it might feel like to run her fingers through it. Verity dropped her fork against her plate, blushing furiously at the clatter it made.

"Everything alright?" Christian murmured to her, carefully retrieving her fork for her and surreptitiously setting it back. She nodded wordlessly and could have sworn she saw Christian smirk a little.

"What a beautiful gown, Lady Huxley."

"Oh - oh thank you, Duchess."

Verity smoothed the front of her gown self-consciously but then stopped, aware suddenly that she was pulling the fabric taut over her breasts directly in Jack's eye line. She blushed harder, swallowing as she noticed the sweep of Jack's dark eyes over her body and away. She hoped she hadn't appeared improper.

"You have been so respectful, wearing your mourning so faithfully, but it is lovely to see you out of them. The colour suits you beautifully. Don't you agree, Christian?"

The Duchess lifted an imperial eyebrow at her youngest son.

"I have always liked this gown," Christian answered easily, "But I am sure my brother has the greatest knowledge of these things, having

travelled in more fashionable areas. Your thoughts, brother?"

Verity wished Christian hadn't drawn her to Jack's attention! She could feel her heart beating against her ribcage as his bright eyes rested on her.

"It is most lovely," he said, warmly. "You are the light of any room, Lady Huxley."

Verity's heart leapt at his words, but he couldn't possibly be sincere. He must have seen so many beautiful and exotic women on his travels - she had heard that Spanish women were particularly alluring - she must seem plain compared to them. Still, he had the good manners not to embarrass her in front of his mother.

"You flatter me too greatly, my dear Duke."

She smiled at the Duchess, trying to move the conversation along.

"You will have heard, I am sure Duchess, that my dear friend Lady Shona is to be married this week to Lord Addington? I am sure she will be the light of the room on that occasion."

"I did hear that." The Duchess nodded significantly to her sons. "An admirable match."

"Mark Addington?" Jack leaned forward. "Why, I am acquainted with him." Jack laughed and shook his head. "How strange to think of Addington with a wife!"

"Was he known for a great bachelor then?" Christian asked.

Verity imagined Lord Addington and Jack carousing around London, dancing with every pretty girl at every ball and breaking hearts along the way.

"Oh no," Jack smiled. "Addington has always been a family man. It has been his greatest wish, and I am so pleased for him that it finally comes to fruition with such a reputably gentle lady."

"Yes," Christian lifted his wine glass. "We should toast their good health, and that they were blessed to find one another."

“To Lord and Lady Addington,” Jack pressed his lips to his glass, and Verity thought she saw the whisper of a wink in her direction. Her throat was too tight to swallow her own wine, so she simply mimed. Was this how it felt to be the subject of Jack Gladstone’s attention as if her face was on fire and her stomach was in knots?

“Indeed!” The Duchess turned to Verity. “Your friend making such a match must put you in mind of matrimony yourself, Lady Huxley.”

“Oh, Shona is very blessed to have fallen in love with such an admirable gentleman,” Verity tried not to look at Jack. “Not all of us can be so lucky.”

“Very good point,” Jack added, his eyes crinkling with a smile. “You are an insightful young woman.”

“Love is desirable of course, but not essential.” The Duchess glanced at Christian who sipped his wine, determinedly not catching his mother’s eye.

“What could be more essential in a marriage, mother?” Jack laughed. “You would surely not advise such a young woman to renounce romance?”

Verity smiled at him, appreciating his lightness when she was the subject of his mother’s consideration. Her recognition was like a spotlight - unnervingly direct.

“Romance can be overrated,” the Duchess waved her hand. “Companionship is so much more palatable for a long marriage. The kind that ensures a strong foundation, a true friendship like... well, yours and Christian’s, Lady Huxley.”

Verity didn’t know what to say. The silence lengthened, and Jack, glancing at his brother turned away and took a long drink from his wine glass, setting it down empty. It seemed to Verity that he looked angry about something. Perhaps he really was such a bachelor that he found the mere mention of a sincere marriage disgusting.

The Duchess was gazing at her with expectant eyes, and even though she had proposed marriage to Christian not hours before, she had no desire to express her intentions in front of his mother! And especially not in front of Jack. Luckily, Christian noticed her discomfort and

jumped in.

“Yes, I have been very blessed in my friends,” Christian glanced at Verity with a small, reassuring smile. “I could only hope to have a marriage as strong as yours and father’s, mother.”

“Yes indeed,” Verity said, gratefully jumping on the new angle. “Your marriage with the late Duke was always held up as an example among the young ladies, Duchess.”

This was enough to distract the Duchess, who launched into a tirade of memories about her younger days as a debutante and how she had met the young Duke of Sussex. This gave the brothers time to reflect on their own childhoods too, and soon they too were talking gaily of cricket adventures and first hunts with their father. Then, the conversation turned to their collective childhood with Verity. She was surprised how many memories Jack had had of her from their younger days and was moved by the excitement and joy with which he recounted them.

“Do you recall the time that your father held an Easter fair at Huxley House, and we rolled painted eggs down the hill?”

Jack smiled, nibbling at the after-dinner treats. The Duchess was starting to doze in her seat, lulled by their light conversation. Christian sat with his own cup of coffee, lightly interjecting his own memories but mainly the conversation flowed easily backwards and forward between Jack and Verity.

“Oh yes,” Verity smiled into her coffee cup. “Papa adored the Easter fair. I loved painting the eggs!”

“But you had a terrible time, do you recall, when you had an allergic reaction?”

“It was flowers, was it not?” Christian sipped his coffee. “You began to sneeze so frantically!”

“It was the chrysanthemums,” Jack corrected.

“I am surprised you remember,” Verity smiled. “Yes, I am allergic to that particular flower.”

“And you sneezed so hard your bonnet fell off!”

“Yes!” Verity laughed. “I was proud of that bonnet!”

“We know,” Jack rolled his eyes. “Don’t we brother? We were all picking up ribbons after you all day!”

“-oh - it is raining,” Christian said.

Christian’s gentle voice drew Jack and Verity’s attention away from one another for a moment to glance out of the great windows. The sun had very nearly set, only the tiniest tinge of orange lingering over the gardens, but the sky was nearly as black as night and the rain hammered against the windowpanes. Verity gasped. She had come out without a brolly or a coat, and the night was already dwindling. She should have left hours before.

“Why did you not mention it?” she hissed at Christian, who shrugged his shoulders innocently.

“I did not notice. However, it seems like you might have to stay here tonight.”

Verity glanced at Jack, askance. The idea of staying in the same house as him, overnight, seemed terribly improper.

“Christian, I can’t possibly -,” she said, turning her head so Jack would not see. Christian seemed not to hear her, for he turned to his mother and said, “Mother, have you noticed the weather?”

The Duchess jerked awake and looked outside, gasping when she saw the trees bending in the wind and the flash of lightning across the sky.

“Goodness! My dear Lady Huxley, did you not arrive in the barouche tonight? That is no carriage for this inclement weather!” The Duchess rang a bell beside her dinner plate. Instantly, a member of the house staff entered. “Hawkins, please inform Mrs. Wheaton that Lady Huxley will be staying the night. She cannot possibly go home in such weather.”

“Oh, Duchess, please - you do not need to -,”

The Duchess raised her hand to silence her. "I will brook no opposition."

Verity nodded, knowing when she was defeated. What would people think when they heard she had stayed the night at the Gladstone estate, especially when it came to the point that she and Christian announced their engagement if he decided to go along with it? Perhaps this was Christian's way of testing the waters, seeing how his mother would respond to her as a potential daughter-in-law. If it was, then he should have said something earlier, so she wasn't blindsided! She threw Christian a glare out of the corner of her eye and was surprised to see he was smiling into his glass.

"Well, I think I shall check that the Blue Room is appropriate for Lady Huxley, and then I shall retire for the evening." The Duchess sighed, rising to her feet. "I trust that my sons shall keep you adequately entertained, my dear."

They rose with the Duchess, the Gladstone brothers moving to kiss their mother good night and Verity falling into a graceful curtsy. They remained standing around the table as the Duchess left, and then Jack lifted his coffee cup and drained it.

"Shall we adjourn to the parlour for some brandy?"

"An excellent idea." Christian offered his arm to Verity and she took it gratefully, noticing, however, the slight frown on Jack's face as she did. "Let us go through."

However, as soon as they had settled in the parlour - Verity sitting nearest the fire with her gold-embroidered shawl wrapped around her shoulders and Jack seated opposite, his long legs crossed and a glass of brandy in his hand - Christian announced he was retiring for the night.

"You're what?" Jack exclaimed, jumping up so quickly he spilt some brandy on the rug.

"I have had an exhausting day," Christian smiled. "I trust you won't object."

"Christian, you can't - we can't -," Verity gestured hopelessly between herself and Jack and saw that he was nodding furiously "- don't leave

us so soon!”

“You both are capable of holding a scintillating conversation, I have borne witness to it for the last two hours.” Christian crossed over to take Verity’s hand, bowing over it. “I am sure you can manage alone.”

“Are you mad?” Verity hissed, hidden from Jack’s view by Christian. “You can’t leave us alone together!”

“Why?” Christian raised his eyebrows. “Do you need a chaperone?”

Verity opened her mouth and shut it, quickly, glaring at her best friend. If she didn’t know any better, she might have thought this was Christian’s plan all along. Then he was gone, disappearing out of the room and leaving her alone with Jack Gladstone. They glanced at one another in shock, as if equally amazed to have been left alone in each other’s presence, then looked away.

All the intimacy she had felt at the table, conversing with her childhood friend, was gone. Now she was aware that she was alone with a man she didn’t really know at all, a man who, if she was honest with herself, made her heart race like no one she had ever known. He seemed just as uncomfortable to be left with her. She wondered if the familiarity she had seen in him at dinner had only been a show for his mother. Verity stared at her hands, twisting her gloved fingers together in her lap, listening to Christian’s receding footsteps. The silence lengthened. The tick of the carriage filled the room. Jack cleared his throat.

“Would you like a glass of brandy, Lady Huxley?”

Verity looked up. He was standing before her, holding out a small glass of dark, golden brandy.

“Verity, you may call me Verity.” She took the glass and smiled. “It seems silly to call me by my title. You have known me your whole life.”

“I thought this was a pleasure only afforded my brother,” Jack smiled, sitting down beside her on the small chaise. “I am finally honoured.”

“What do you mean?” Verity took a tentative sip. She usually only drank wine at dinner, but the brandy was sweet, and she was

definitely in need of fortification.

“Well, you were always quick to call Christian by his first name, but whenever you saw me it was ‘Lord Gladstone,’ this or ‘Lord Gladstone,’ that, or when you were very angry with me -,” Jack smiled, a slow lopsided smile that made Verity’s stomach flip. “You would call me ‘*The Lord Duke*,’ in such a sarcastic tone -,”

“I was not sarcastic!” Verity exclaimed. Jack gave her a knowing look. “At least, not very often. Only when you were cheating at cards or stepping on my toes when we danced.”

“Do you have no good memories of me?” Jack leaned forward.

Verity felt his knee pressed against the silk of her gown. She swallowed hard, fear and excitement filling her, but she didn’t move away.

“I have many,” she took another sip of brandy, longer this time, letting the rich, syrupy liquid coat her tongue.

“Well, you must tell me one.”

“Must I?” Verity laughed, shaking her head. “You are a very strange man, *my Lord Duke*.”

Jack groaned, leaning his head back so that the dark curls of his hair fell across his forehead. “Please no! If I am permitted to call you Verity, then you must call me Jack.”

“Jack,” Verity said softly.

“Thank you.” He smiled at her with such tenderness that Verity felt herself flushing under his gaze. “Now that we are on first name terms, you must tell me why I am so strange to you.”

“Because you have so many exciting memories from your travels to choose from, I do not know why you would need one of mine from our childhood!” Verity laughed.

“Because you are not in those other ones,” Jack teased. He pushed her shoulder gently, and it was as if Verity had been touched by a

scorching brand. “Now tell me.”

Verity took a quick breath and sipped the remainder of her brandy glass, giving herself a little time. How could she tell him that every memory she had of Jack Gladstone was treasured?

“Well,” she began slowly. “Do you recall, when you graduated Oxford, your father held a ball for you?”

“I do.”

“It was my first ball out in society, I was not yet sixteen, and I was so nervous.”

Verity fiddled with the stem of her empty brandy glass. Her cheeks were flushed red at the memory, or was it from the brandy? Her words were definitely flowing easier than she was used to.

“Christian was up at Oxford himself at the time, and I was so afraid that I wouldn’t have anyone to dance with. Shona attended also, and she wore the most beautiful gown of creamy yellow, it was very fashionable.” Verity took a deep breath. “I will admit to feeling a bit ...unsure of myself next to her confidence and ease. Then, *you* asked me to dance.”

She looked up into his face, watching the reflection of the orange flames dance in his eyes.

“It was my first ball, my first proper partnered dance, and you were—well—” she stumbled over her words, determined not to say what was on her heart: that he was perfect in every way.

“You were the perfect gentleman.” She finished lamely.

There was a moment of quiet. She realised the memory she had chosen was not an innocent childhood reflection. At that point, Jack had been a grown man, he had reached the age of majority and was already very eligible. As she recalled, he danced with nearly every young woman in the room that night, and each one probably remembered it as clearly as she did. She flushed in embarrassment at the thought that she was just one of many faces to him, just a blur of curled hair, chiffon and silk and pretty smiles.

“Well, I am sure you hardly remember,” she said smoothly, setting down her glass and rising, feeling the world tilt slightly as she did. “Now, I think I should retire -,”

“I do remember.”

Jack’s hand had shot out to catch hers. She looked down at it, feeling removed and woozy. He tugged on her glove slightly and she promptly sat down again, too wobbly to stay on her feet.

Jack frowned. “Are you quite well?”

“I’m fine, just a little dizzy.” She shook her head, closing her eyes for a moment. “What do you mean, you remember?”

“I remember the ball. I remember dancing with you. I remember the colour of your gown -,”

“It was green,” Verity swallowed hard, her head spinning. She couldn’t believe he remembered.

“I know, it matched your eyes.”

She noticed that his hand was still on top of hers, resting in the small space of cushion between them. Jack’s dark eyes drifted over her face, resting on her hair.

“You wore your hair longer than you do now, since you were only a young girl, and it was the most perfect shade of golden-red.” He lifted his hand as if in a trance, stretching out his fingers towards her hair but then, clenching his fingers into a fist and withdrawing.

“What else do you remember?” Verity asked, breathlessly. She turned her body towards him as if pulled by an invisible tether, and her hand shifted under his. She felt him grasp her fingers tightly.

“I remember how it felt to hold you close to me,” Jack’s voice was husky, his face leaning closer to hers so that she could feel his warm, sweet breath. “I remember how my heart raced each time our hands touched and how your smile lit up the room. I remember that every dance I had after that was a chore for me and with every step, I thought of you.”

They were so close now, so close that Verity could not think clearly. Her dizziness had only increased. She wasn't being sensible, and she knew it. She needed to get married and she already knew Jack was beyond her reach. How could she compare to the dazzling women he must have met on his travels? It was best not to get her hopes up. She shook her head and stood.

"I am sorry, I - I think I should retire now, I - I am so dizzy." Against her will, she found herself swaying, closing her eyes against the red spirals in front of her eyes.

"Verity!"

Jack's arms were around her in a moment, steadying her and holding her close. She gasped and looked up into his face, his dark eyes stormy and his face lit golden in the firelight.

"You - you looked as if you might swoon." She saw his throat working as his eyes lingered on her lips.

"Thank you," Verity whispered. She could feel his heart beating and wondered if he could feel hers thundering just as fast. She knew she should move away, but she couldn't. All she wanted was to stay in his arms forever.

"When we danced that night, this is what I thought of." Jack's voice was so low now it was almost a growl, the sound of it sending a thrill through Verity's body. "Holding you like this, and - and -,"

"And what?"

His eyes were as dark as the thunderous sky outside. His face was carved with desire.

"And embracing you." Jack's fingers flexed on her arms, holding her fast. Their faces were so close together and Verity could barely breathe. His lips were full and inviting, and barely a whisper away from her own. She could almost feel the words he spoke. "It is all I could think of."

"And now?"

Their lips met. For a moment neither of them breathed or moved, but Verity could sense that every muscle in Jack's body was tense like a bowstring, waiting for permission to release. She relaxed into him, moving her lips softly against his. As if he had been waiting for her to react first, Jack softened his grip on her arms, letting them hang loose as he held her hands and kissed her back. It was her first kiss and it was everything she had imagined, and better. She had never felt such a flood of emotions; tenderness, fear, exhilaration and attraction, she didn't want it to end, but suddenly a clap of thunder sounded in the room and they startled apart.

"Oh." Verity pressed her fingers to her lips. Her hand trembled. "I - you - you must forgive me - I am not myself, I have had too much brandy, I should not have..."

"It is all right," Jack held his hand up to silence her babbling. He smiled to himself, rubbing his face with a half-laugh.

"Jack, I -,"

"You do not need to worry, Lady Huxley. I am the soul of discretion."

He took a step back and bowed low to her much as he had once done as her dance partner. Verity was surprised by this switch in his manner, from a raw, open honesty that set her heart aflame to the smooth, suave exterior of a gentleman of the world. She noticed the way he stopped using her name, too. Did he mean that the kiss was merely a moment of nostalgia, to be lost in memory? Did he mean that it meant nothing to him now? She didn't know what to do, so she simply stepped back, as carefully as she could without feeling faint again, and inclined her head in a gentle curtsy.

"Goodnight, my dear Duke."

Chapter Seven

“How was your stay at the Gladstone estate, my dear?”

Verity glanced at her stepmother, who sat at the head of the dining room table with an expectant look on her face. After the funeral, Martina had announced a return to the Huxley estate in Richmond, declaring she could not possibly stay in the resplendent London townhouse any longer. For Verity, it was a stab in the gut to return to her father’s estate, but she refused to be cowed. She sat politely and pretended not to be offended when Martina set up house in the grand, country house taking daily calls from her neighbours and sitting in Verity’s father’s seat at meals.

“It was pleasant, thank you, considering that it was essential,” Verity spoke lightly but wanted to be clear that Martina understood she hadn’t angled for a night’s stay. “I would have returned, despite the rain, but the Duchess of Sussex would not permit it.”

“Oh yes.” Martina’s eyes sparkled nastily. “I am sure you did all you could.”

Verity bit back her anger. Since Martina’s revelation about her parents, Verity found even the barest conversation with her entirely intolerable.

“I forgot to mention, my dear Lady Law will be coming to join us from her father’s estate today.”

Verity resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Lady Law was Martina’s daughter, yet even inside the family, Martina insisted on calling Daniella by her title. When Martina’s first husband had died, he had strangely left his entire estate to his daughter rather than his wife, forcing Martina to marry again but leaving Daniella with an enviable fortune. Daniella had no need to come to the Huxley estate when she

had her own, but Martina loved an opportunity to lavish care and love on Daniella in front of Verity.

“How lovely,” Verity said evenly. “How long shall she be with us?”

“I am not certain yet, my dear. I have great plans for her.” Martina took a sip of tea, her eyes narrowed at Verity over the cup. “Which reminds me, the new Duke of Sussex and his brother will be joining us for dinner this evening.”

Verity’s hands froze. “Tonight?”

“Yes indeed.” Martina smiled frostily. “You shall be quite tired of their company by now, I am sure.”

Verity knew Martina had done this deliberately, determined to get rumours started that Verity and Christian were a match. She was intending to make it impossible for Verity to back-track, for now, if she didn’t make a match with Christian, she would be spoken of all over London as the woman who had chased him all over town.

“Daniella has never met the Gladstone’s,” Martina continued, her eyes darting over Verity’s face as she watched for a reaction. “I look forward to introducing her to the young Duke.”

Verity breathed in sharply through her nose. Whatever she did, she could not let Martina see, in any way, that she was impacted by the mention of Jack. She had barely slept the night at the Gladstone estate, lying awake in the beautiful blue room, watching the lightning split across the sky and hearing the rain clatter against the lead roofing and thinking, over and over, of Jack’s lips against hers.

“I am sure it shall be lovely.” She set her utensils on her place. “Now if you’ll excuse me -,” before she could finish her sentence, the downstairs bell had sounded, and Martina had sprung out of her seat. “That will be Daniella! I asked her to come early so we could go shopping for a new gown, she must look her best for tonight!” Martina turned at the door. “I thought you might wear one of her old gowns since she has such lovely taste.”

With one final frosty smile, she was gone. Verity followed slowly, watching as the servants flung open the front doors and admitted Daniella Law. She floated in, dressed impeccably in a violet gown and

matching coat, with a bonnet adorned with peacock feathers.

“Hello, mama!” Her melodious voice floated across the hall as she untied her bonnet, releasing her ribbons of red hair. “I brought all my gowns, just like you asked.”

“Oh lovely, but I was thinking a new evening dress might be in order.”

“Oh! Do you really think?”

Her lips pursed, her porcelain skin glowing in the gentle sunlight. She was two years older than Verity and seemed to carry herself with the steely charm of a true London socialite. Beside her, Verity always felt like a country bumpkin. Daniella’s eyes rested on her and Verity immediately blushed to be caught gazing, like a longing child.

“Hello,” Daniella looked warily at her mother. She was always reserved with Verity as if she knew that her mother disliked her. “Is Verity joining us?”

“Oh no, I should think not.” Martina flapped her hand, absently. “Verity can wear one of your old gowns.”

“No.” Verity’s voice was sharper than she had intended. Both women looked up in surprise. “No, thank you, I have my own gowns.”

She turned and walked up the stairs, keeping her back as stiff a rod as she heard their whispers following her upstairs.

“Is she quite well, mother?”

“Oh, do not mind her, my dear, she is only jealous of your good fortune.”

The words smarted, and Verity bristled. If she was jealous of Daniella, it was for only one thing - that she had her mother’s love so completely. Verity had never missed her mother as much as she had in the last 24 hours. Sighing, she let herself into her bedroom and closed the door behind her.

When a woman had her first kiss, surely it was her mother whom she should share that with. She imagined what it might have been like, to

come home from her adventure and sit in the conservatory with her mother and tell her all the secrets of the night before - how Jack had held her hand so tightly, how he had looked at her with such passion it took her breath away, how his lips had been so soft and when he held her, she had felt like she must be in heaven.

Perhaps a mother could have given her guidance too, could have answered the questions she had. Why had Jack seemed so formal after their kiss? Why had he kissed her at all? How could he look at her with such longing and yet step away from her? Perhaps a mother could tell her honestly if pinning her affections on a man like Jack Gladstone was like wishing on a star. Perhaps her mother might have stroked her hair, held her as she shed her tears of confusion and shown her the way to win Jack's true heart, and win it for good.

If wishing made it so.

Verity brushed away her tears with an impatient hand and shook her head. There was no use in getting tangled in a fantasy. Jack Gladstone had a reputation for breaking hearts and if she wasn't careful, she would be another. After losing her mother and her father, she needed to protect her heart above all else. *At least with Christian*, she thought suddenly, *my heart would always be safe.*

But would it ever be truly alive? A small, insidious voice asked inside her mind. She sighed deeply. She didn't know. She didn't know if anyone, anywhere could make her feel more alive than Jack.

Chapter Eight

“Are you well, Jack?”

“Hmm?” Jack turned in the carriage to face Christian, who was looking at him with an amused look on his face.

“What on earth has got you so reflective?” Christian joked. “Did something happen with you and Verity last night?”

“What? No!” Jack looked out of the window, turning his face from Christian’s. “I don’t know why you would think that. Especially after our mother has clearly decided she is destined to be your wife.”

Jack had endured a gruelling breakfast that morning where their mother had peppered Christian with questions about Verity, intoned her virtues to him over and over again, and even gone so far as to suggest which of the family gems might best serve as an engagement ring. Christian had borne it all manfully, especially since he had retired early for the night and had no notion of what had happened, but for Jack, it had been torture. His night had been filled with dreams of Verity, of her supple body and luscious lips and he had woken at the crack of dawn, unable to sleep. He had instead stood by his windows, brooding and trying not to think about the fact Verity was asleep merely doors away from him.

He couldn’t remember the last time a woman’s touch had driven him to distraction like this, haunting his dreams and his waking daydreams. He wondered if any woman ever had. Then, as if it wasn’t bad enough already, mother had announced he and Christian were expected at the Huxley estate for dinner. He could give no reasonable explanation for excusing himself and giving any hint of his discomfort to Christian was out of the question. How could he explain that he had kissed the woman Christian was supposed to be courting?

He did not blame Verity, if anything, he blamed himself. He knew young women found him engaging, enchanting even, and she had clearly felt regret and remorse for it afterwards. She had looked so shocked, so embarrassed, her fair skin flushed so pink in the firelight. He groaned and rested his head against the cold carriage window. For the first time since returning to England, he wished himself back on the continent, freely travelling and kissing fair maidens without regret or heartache.

“We are here.”

Christian’s voice cut into his morose thinking, and he saw the lights of the Huxley estate bright against the sunset. He sighed heavily and climbed out the carriage, stepping aside for Christian.

“It is strange to think of this place without Lord Huxley, isn’t it?” Christian sighed, misinterpreting Jack’s own sigh as melancholy over the Lord’s death.

“It is rather, yes.” Jack looked up at the open door and saw three figures standing there. He frowned. “Who else is attending tonight?”

The brothers took the steps together. Jack’s heart jumped when he saw Verity, sank a little when he saw the Marchioness, for she was always a superficial dinner companion --and he did not recognise the third woman.

“That is the Marchioness’ daughter from her first marriage,” Christian muttered, “the Lady Law.”

Jack nodded and the two brothers bowed low before the ladies.

“Welcome, my lord Duke,” the Marchioness extended a long, pale hand to Jack who obediently bent to kiss it.

“How pleasant to see you so well, Marchioness.”

Jack glanced at Verity. Her eyes were downcast, but he thought he noticed a slight flush under her chin. He recognised it from the night before, that same adorable reddening of the skin had appeared when he had held her in his arms. He wrenched his eyes back to the Marchioness, noticing the slight narrowing of her eyes as they flit between himself and Verity.

"I am so sorry for your loss, Marchioness," he said, trying to distract her.

"Oh thank you, Duke."

Her smile was cold and a little horrifying. Jack had seen a shark off the coast of Greece. The Marchioness' dark pupils reminded him of that great, soulless beast.

"This is my daughter, Lady Daniella Law." Jack bowed respectfully. "Perhaps you might escort her into the dining room? I am sure that Lord Gladstone is eager for the company of my step-daughter, though I am surprised you all have not tired of her yet, she has been so often in your company!"

The Marchioness' laugh tinkled like breaking of glass, but levity could not hide the slight towards Verity hidden inside. Jack felt Christian bristle with anger behind him, (he knew Christian had no real love for the Marchioness) and saw Verity's shoulders slump out of the corner of his eye. There was nothing he could do to make it better for her, any deference he showed would only be fuel for the Marchioness' fire, so he simply smiled his most dashing smile and offered his arm to Daniella.

"I would be honoured," he said, and then offered his other arm to the Marchioness. "Can I escort you also, Marchioness?"

The Marchioness' face was alight with excitement, so Jack risked a glance back over his shoulder.

"You don't mind me taking the lead, Christian?" he called jovially, using it as a cover to check on Verity. With a flicker of her eyes, a flash of those green irises, she told him she was grateful. Jack's heart contracted. He forced himself to look away. They entered the beautiful Huxley dining room, the portrait of the late Marquess loomed on the wall. He noticed Verity's sad eyes when she glanced at the painting. The Marchioness did not even look at it.

"Now, my dear Duke, won't you sit here?" The Marchioness directed him to a seat beside Daniella and guided Christian to the seat opposite her. "Verity was so eager to sit beside my Lord Gladstone!" The Marchioness announced, gesturing for them all to be seated. "I could hardly deny the girl the opportunity."

Jack, sitting opposite Verity noticed the sharp, dark glare she threw her stepmother at her words. He wondered at how Verity maintained her composure with this woman throwing barbs at her all the time. He saw with a flame of jealousy the way his brother leant his blonde head towards Verity and whispered something to her that she obviously found comforting, by the warm expression she gave him.

“Perhaps you might get to know Lady Law a little better, whilst these two further their plans.” The Marchioness propped the tips of her fingers together and looked at him meaningfully.

Jack felt like he was a violin, tuned to the sound of Verity’s discomfort. The tightening of her shoulders, the clenching of her hands on the table, the twitch of her mouth, all of it seemed to be visible to him even when he wasn’t looking at her. All he wanted to do was help make it better, but he had no idea how.

“I am sure your Mother and I shall be speaking about their future someday soon!”

“Actually, any future of the Gladstone estate would be a discussion for me, and the, uh -,” Jack waved his hand in Verity’s direction but carefully avoided naming her, “- the second party’s legal representative.”

“Well, a mother’s opinion is always valued.” The Marchioness’ smile was icy.

“Not in matters of the estate. For those, I am afraid, the Gladstone men are more traditional. We only deal with the family’s *male* representation.”

Jack winked at his brother who smirked into his glass, as did Verity, who bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing. Neither Daniella nor the Marchioness was close enough with the Gladstone family to realise just how absurd a lie Jack was telling. The idea that the Duchess of Sussex was not, in every way, involved in her sons every decision, was laughable.

“Well then, perhaps we should talk of Lady Law’s future,” The Marchioness recovered, laying a possessive hand on Daniella’s arm. “For I am her legal guardian and she is the keeper of her own estate, we can deal with you directly, my Lord Duke.”

“How interesting.”

Jack sighed inwardly. He knew exactly how this conversation would go. Clearly, the Marchioness had plans for her daughter, and they included him. He steeled himself for a long, exhausting evening, and tried not to look at Verity. He tried not to look at Verity at all.

Chapter Nine

“*L*ady Verity, some flowers have arrived for you.”

“For me?”

Verity turned from the dressing table to see Trudy opening the door for a servant with an enormous bouquet. Verity gasped. It was a riot of pinks and whites, roses and peonies and so many beautiful blooms.

“Who could it be from?” she wondered aloud. “Is there a card?”

Trudy frowned and picked something out of the bouquet. “Only this, miss.”

Verity’s heart skipped a beat. It wasn’t a note at all, but a playing card. A jack of hearts. She instinctively hid it in her palm.

“What does it mean?” Trudy wondered.

“I could not tell you.” Verity sat down again at the vanity. “Put them on the dresser, Trudy, we must finish my hair if I am to be ready for Shona’s wedding ball.”

“Are you sure about this gown, Miss Verity?” Trudy asked, laying a dark, green dress upon the bed, carrying it like a swooning girl. “Lady Law has offered you the use of some of hers, they are... perhaps more fashionable.”

“No, I want to wear that one. It used to be mother’s.” Verity slipped pearl earrings into her ears. “I had it remade to wear today.”

“That is lovely, miss.” Trudy stood behind her and squeezed her shoulders tightly. “She would be so proud. Oh! I have a thought -,”

Trudy held up a finger and bustled out of the room.

Verity turned her face one way and another, admiring what Trudy had achieved with her hair. The green leaves and pearls she had woven into the style made her hair look bright and blonde in one light, and soft and red in another. She had no desire to upstage her friend at this ball, it was Shona's moment and she wanted her to shine, but she also knew Jack would be there, as well as Daniella and her stepmother. She wanted to at least impress, not seem like the poor stepchild Martina had made her out to be at dinner the other night. Verity still flushed with rage and humiliation to think of it.

Jack had managed to navigate Martina's tactless comments with grace and poise, but she could not imagine how he could have left the table thinking of her in the same way as before. Martina had made it sound like she was aggressively hunting Christian! That was without considering the way Daniella had been offered up as the supremely superior specimen in every single way.

Daniella had engaged Jack in polite and witty conversation all night, managing to maintain her elegance even when it seemed like the Marchioness would jump over the table and force Daniella and Jack together. Even Christian intoning kind remarks in her ear all night had not helped the crippling depression and helplessness she felt when she had seen Jack smile at Daniella or Daniella laugh at something Jack said. All she really wanted to do was to retreat from Huxley, to disappear from society forever so she would never have to face Jack again, but she couldn't.

Verity took a deep breath. So, if she couldn't hide, she was at least going to look as compelling as she possibly could. Suddenly, Verity noticed a tickle in the back of her throat. She coughed, but that seemed to make it worse. Breathing in more air seemed to make her throat tighter. Was it anxiety at the prospect of seeing Jack? Was it perhaps the perfume? With her eyes streaming and her face flushing painfully, she realised the only time she had ever felt this way before was when she was a child. She jumped up, backing away from the dresser with the flowers on top of it and was fiddling with the window latch when Trudy burst back in.

"I found them, miss! Oh - Oh my goodness! What is it?"

"The - the - flowers -," Verity croaked out, waving her hands. "Take -

take - them away!"

"Yes, Miss!"

The latch slid open and Verity leaned out, gasping in the fresh air with relief. "They - they must have Chrysanthemums in them!" she called back to Trudy.

"They do, Miss! Oh, it's such a shame - most of your acquaintances know of your allergy. They could have only come from a stranger, I suppose. Perhaps someone who knew your father?"

"Perhaps."

Verity leaned into the cold breeze, letting her dressing robe fall open and the night air cooled her inflamed skin. Trudy was right, of course. Verity's father had always made certain that no Chrysanthemums made their way into the house, and all the servants of their neighbours were always informed to make sure their employers were warned when the Huxley family went calling, they should never have the flowers around. The Duchess of Sussex was fastidious about it, and for her sake had never even grown them in her garden. Christian knew too. After her dinner at the Gladstone's, Verity had been sure that Jack knew too. Clearly, he had not been listening.

She sighed heavily, taking in the scent of jasmine from the gardens below. She loved the Huxley estate with all her heart. It was always the house in which she had felt most at home, and now, it felt like Martina was trying to force her out of it. For a moment, when she was kissing Jack, she had experienced a flash of a vision, almost like a dream where she saw the two of them, happy and content, married and living together at Huxley. Now that vision seemed more and more like a fantasy. Surely, he was just a man who found her attractive, had felt the urge to kiss her and had done so. She was sure he had kissed many ladies, all over Europe. There was no way he could be imagining the same future she was, especially since he didn't even remember this crucial detail about her life.

"Come in from the chill, miss," Trudy scolded, pulling at her sleeve. "You know, I shall have a word with Mr. Gorton who takes the deliveries, he should have known not to bring those flowers in! You could have damaged yourself! Let me see your skin."

Verity obediently lifted her chin, so Trudy could examine her. Trudy tutted, shaking her head.

“We shall have to put some chamomile lotion on it,” Trudy reached for a small pot on the vanity. “I do not want you coming out in a rash.”

Verity breathed a sigh of relief as the cold liquid touched her flaming skin.

“Do you think it will be noticeable? My gown scoops quite low.” She glanced in the mirror. “I could wear a shawl I suppose.”

“No need, miss.” Trudy smiled and pulled a square, velvet box out of her pocket. “Here.”

Verity looked at Trudy curiously as she opened the lid of the box. She gasped. Inside was the most beautiful string of pearls, a triple rope of creamy, fresh-water pearls that Verity touched with reverence. They were smooth and cold to the touch and slightly brushed with dust as if they had been lying away hidden for a long time.

“Where did you get these, Trudy?”

“They were your mother’s.” Trudy’s eyes were soft. “Your father entrusted them to me when she died. He was worried he might lose them, or mislay them or perhaps -,” Trudy’s throat worked as she stumbled over the words. “- he might be forgetful and re-gift them if he ever remarried. He knew how much your dear mother wanted you to have them.”

Trudy lifted the pearls out of the box and set them around Verity’s neck, gently lifting her curls to close the clasp. As the pearls settled around Verity’s neck, she had a sudden flash of memory. She recalled sitting on her mother’s bed, watching her prepare for an evening out with her father. She recalled the scent of the room, the soft jasmine perfume her mother always wore, and the way her mother’s blonde hair shone in the candlelight. She remembered, with a twist of her heart, her mother drawing the lustrous pearls from their box and settling them around her ivory neck. She remembered the way her mother would catch her eye in the mirror and beckon her to come to close the clasp for her.

“Miss Verity? Are you alright?”

“Yes, I am, thank you, Trudy.” Verity smiled through her tears, blinking them away. “I am just so grateful you saved them for me. I - I had forgotten all about them.”

Trudy smiled toothily. “I was happy to do it, Miss. Besides, I would be damned before I saw your stepmother get her claws on them!”

Verity laughed, covering her mouth. “Oh, Trudy! I am so glad you are here with me!” She sighed. “The house would be quite unbearable without you.”

“I know, miss.” Trudy lifted the gown from the bed. “I shall miss you when you are gone and married.”

As Verity stood so Trudy could lift the gown over her head, she was struck by the impact of Trudy’s words. She had been so focused on the fact that she must save her parent’s reputation by securing a husband, that she had not thought of all the ways her life would change if she did marry. She would have to leave more than Huxley House behind. Her intimate relationship with Trudy would be over, she would have to meet a new chambermaid, and train her, and learn the rhythms of a new house. As Trudy settled the dress on Verity’s arms and gently began to secure the tiny buttons on the side of her gown, Verity tried to lessen the panic she felt when she thought of leaving her home. She had to focus on the here and now. She must attend this ball whilst maintaining her dignity. She must not embarrass Christian. She must not get distracted from her goal, and she must, must not think about Jack Gladstone.

“Oh, my lady,” Trudy breathed. “You look beautiful.”

Verity glanced at herself in the mirror. “It will serve.” She pressed her hands against her stomach. “But I am sure Daniella has a much more impressive gown.”

“That is not the point, my dear.” Trudy put her palm against Verity’s cheek with a cheeky smile. “A dress is not only about how one looks, but it is also about how one feels inside it.”

“And how should one feel?”

“Well, when living with your stepmother, you should feel like you are wearing armour.” Trudy gave her a kiss on the cheek. “And when searching for a husband at a ball, you must be ready for battle. God go with you, my dear!”

Trudy waited watchfully as Verity left the room, keeping an eye on her as she joined Lady Law-Huxley (Trudy could never bring herself to even think of Martina as ‘The Marchioness’ since she was no fit replacement for Verity’s mother) and Lady Daniella in the hallway. Trudy bristled inside when she saw the dismissive way Martina brushed past Verity, making a sharp comment about her reddened skin so that Verity put a defensive hand on her pearls. She snorted at the way Martina’s eyes widened as she noticed the elegant necklace. Martina was a magpie for jewels and gems, and Trudy knew she would be burning to learn how Verity had laid hold of such a precious piece of jewellery. Trudy hoped it made her fingers itch to learn the pearls had been Verity’s mother.

Once she had seen Verity was settled safely in the carriage and driven off into the night, she went downstairs to the kitchen, looking for Barry Gorton. She found him by the backstairs, having a quick smoke with his collar undone.

“How now, Trudy,” he puffed smoke up to the sky. “What you needin’?”

“I have a bone to pick with you, Barry Gorton.” Trudy crossed her arms. “How could you let those flowers in the house? You know well that they make the Mistress poorly.”

Below stairs, the staff always referred to Verity as ‘The Mistress,’ even though the title should technically be reserved for Martina. The staff were loyal to the first Marchioness, and when she passed had called Verity ‘the little Mistress,’ until she was grown. Martina was known as ‘the lady,’ or, by the cook who found her particularly difficult to work for, ‘Her Upstairs.’

Barry frowned at her. “We’ve not had a delivery of flowers today, Trudy.”

“Now how could that be?” Trudy put her hands on her hips. “The upstairs manservant was told to give them to me.”

“Told by whom? It wasn’t me!” Barry protested. “Hey, Tommo!” Barry shouted back through the kitchen door, and the manservant in question stuck his head out.

“Aye?” The young boy raised his eyebrows.

“Who told you to give them flowers to the Mistress?”

“Her Upstairs.” Tommo rolled his eyes. “Said they came this morning by special delivery.”

Barry and Trudy shared a knowing look.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” Barry finished his smoke and crushed it under his boot. “Nothing came by special delivery today. So those flowers, either she had them delivered to her secretly or she brought them into the house herself.”

“Why’d she do such a thing?” Tommo asked.

Trudy thought of the way Martina’s eyes had narrowed at the sight of Verity looking so fresh and flawless next to her own daughter. She thought of the master’s journal, of Martina’s instruction that Verity must marry Lord Gladstone, and of the Jack of heart card that Verity thought she had hidden so carefully from Trudy’s eyes.

“I know why,” Trudy said, darkly.

Chapter Ten

Jack watched enviously as Mark Addington danced with his new wife. He saw the way Mark's eyes were alight with joy as he held the new Lady Addington close to his chest, her beautiful white gown sweeping the floor as they moved gracefully through the elegant dance. He couldn't help but imagine what that type of contentment might feel like, to be so wholly and completely known by another person. He had a flash of memory of holding Verity close in his arms, of pressing his lips to hers. At that moment he had thought he'd felt a glimmer of that. What he would do to feel it again.

He tried to scan the ballroom for her, but it was like trying to find a needle in a haystack. The frolicking dancers were in the centre of the marble floor and had pushed everyone else into the spaces around the wall in a crush of bodies. Everywhere Jack looked he saw the same black dress coats, the same pale silky fabrics. Christian stood beside him, engaged in conversation with their mother. Suddenly, appearing like a jack in the box so quickly she made Jack spill his brandy, was the Marchioness Huxley. Jack groaned inwardly but plastered a friendly smile on his face.

"Marchioness," he inclined his head. "How good to see you here."

"My Lord Duke." The Marchioness sank into an unconvincing curtsy. "We would not miss it. Daniella is such a special friend of the bride."

"Is that so?" chirped in the Duchess. "I thought I knew all of Lady Shona's friends. Who is this, my dear?"

"This is the Dowager Marchioness Huxley, Lady Huxley's stepmother," Jack said, noticing how the Marchioness' grin faltered slightly at the mention of Verity's name.

“Marchioness, you will know of my mother, the Dowager Duchess of Sussex.”

“Of course, such a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Duchess.”

“Hmph.”

Jack and Christian shared a sideways smirk as their mother looked the Marchioness over with disdain.

“That is a lovely gown, Marchioness,” she said.

“Why, thank you, Duchess.” The Marchioness smoothed the canary yellow bodice of her dress.

“It is so interesting to me, this attitude of young widows to come out of their mourning clothes so soon. You know, of course, that it is tradition to wear one’s weeds for one year and one day. At least,” the Duchess smiled tightly, “that is how it has always been done in the peerage.”

“Well, of course,” the Marchioness spluttered, her pinched face reddening. “But you know, dear Verity was so keen to come out of her mourning clothes, so it hardly seemed proper -,”

“Well, that is different.” The Duchess’ voice was sharp, her hand tightening on her glass at the Marchioness’ use of Verity’s familiar name in a public setting.

“*Lady Huxley* is a young woman, and a daughter mourning her father, not a wife mourning a husband. I think it rather shows the devotion of the wife, does it not? When my father passed, my mother wore her weeds for the rest of her life. I shall do no less, to honour the late Duke’s memory,” the Duchess turned her face away as if she could no longer bear to look at the Marchioness, “I shall at least wait a year and one day, rather than *less than a month*.”

The Duchess’ insults hung in the air between them, but rather than feeling awkward, Jack felt immensely proud of his mother. He glanced at Christian and knew he was feeling the same way. He even thought he saw the shadow of a wink as Christian lifted his sherry glass to his lips.

“Well,” the Marchioness laughed humourlessly, “I suppose our differences will have to be put aside when a long-anticipated event takes place. Lord Gladstone,” she nodded to Christian. “I believe Lady Huxley was looking for you earlier.”

The Duchess scoffed, clearly disbelieving the idea of Verity hunting around her friends’ wedding ball for Christian.

“And your daughter, Marchioness?” The Duchess raised her eyebrows. “Has she been looking high and low for my other son?” She handed her glass to Christian and pulled her shawl tightly around her shoulders. “I believe I shall see if the Duchess of Kent is in the parlour. The company here is somewhat lacking.”

“Let me accompany you, mother.” Christian took her arm and the two of them passed by Jack.

The Duchess leaned in close to Jack’s shoulder whilst the Marchioness looked on with narrowed eyes and whispered, “That woman is not worthy of her title. Join us for a drink when you can break free of her clutches.”

Jack snorted into his drink. His mother could be a real wit when her fury was roused.

He smiled at the Marchioness, gratified to see his dazzling looks were enough to placate her. She moved closer to him and hid her words behind her fan.

“Speaking of my daughter,” she began, “Lady Law’s dance card has been full this evening, but I do believe she would be happy to stand up with you, dear Duke. Look, there she is – and without a partner.”

The Marchioness pointed to the other end of the ballroom. Standing by the long catering tables laden with pastries and great serving pots of white soup and colourful fruit arrangements, was Verity. Daniella stood nearby, looking very elegant in a fashionable purple gown that set off her red hair beautifully, but Jack’s heart stopped when his eyes found Verity’s face. In a room full of pastel gowns and light muslin dresses, Verity had chosen an emerald dress in a rich, alluring tone. Green. It was almost the same colour as the gown she had worn when they first danced together all those years ago. Jack set down his glass and straightened his back.

“Excuse me, Marchioness, there is a lady I must see about a dance.”

He registered the look of satisfaction on the Marchioness’ face as he crossed the dance floor. Daniella saw him coming and, to his slight surprise, she quickly engaged the young lady next to her in conversation, averting her eyes from his gaze. None of it mattered, however, when Verity caught his eye. He saw the way her cheeks flushed, how her gloved hands fiddled on the stem of her wine glass. He smiled and bowed low before her.

“May I have this dance, my Lady Huxley?”

She smiled softly and took his hand. “You may.”

As he guided her towards the dancers, he saw the Lord and Lady Addington smile and lean their heads together, speaking intimately. He felt the eyes of the assembled company on them both, for he knew rumours had been spread far and wide that Verity and Christian were soon to be engaged. Perhaps the onlookers were considering it a sign of his favour, as the Duke of Sussex, on this potential match for his brother. Little did they know the truth of his heart. As they joined the flow of dancers, stepping close together, he said softly, “I like your gown tonight.”

“Thank you.”

“It reminds me of the dress you wore when we last danced together.”

He saw the rosy flush climb high in Verity’s cheek at his words. The pearls and green leaves weaved into her strawberry blonde hair glinted in the soft lighting. He wondered how it would feel to push his fingers into her golden coppery locks. He didn’t think he had seen anyone so beautiful. He squeezed her hands as they moved close together, the soft slope of her creamy breasts was so close to his chest, that he saw her exhalation of breath as they moved apart again. He swallowed hard, trying to keep his eyes away from the alluring strings of pearls that shone around her white throat. How he longed to slide his fingers against them, to perhaps even press his lips against the flushed skin beneath them. He took a ragged breath.

“Though I think, if it is possible, you are more beautiful today than you were then.”

Verity's lips parted, her pink tongue wetting her lower lip before she spoke. He remembered with a lurch of his stomach the way that bottom lip tasted, soft and sweet with the lingering taste of brandy. He resisted the urge to bend his head and kiss her right there. When their eyes met, it was as if his skin was alive with the fire of her gaze. It was as if she were inside that memory with him, feeling the intensity of their first kiss. The dance called for them to step forward and hold hands. Hers were shaking.

"Jack -," his heart sang when she used his first name, but her voice was low and urgent. "You mustn't do this."

"Do what?" he murmured back, his lips close to her ear as they moved past one another, stepping in elegant choreography. She smelled wonderful, like jasmine, and his lips brushed the edge of her silky hair. It was all he could do not to force her to stop dancing, and simply pull her body against his. He reluctantly let her go. She stood opposite him, her hands trembling and her eyes bright. When they stepped past one another again, she tugged his hand lightly as a warning.

"Look at me like that," she hissed. "You must not look at me like that, Jack."

He was supposed to drop her hand and turn to his next partner, but he couldn't. He held onto her fingers, watching as her eyes darted furtively towards him and then around the room, the emerald irises gleaming. He thought he could look into those green eyes forever.

"What if I can't stop?" He squeezed her fingers, pulling her eyes back to his. "What if I can't stop looking at you, Verity?"

She pulled her fingers away sharply, glaring at him. Somehow, the electricity of her anger made her more compelling to him. The way her back straightened showing her lovely figure, the way her eyes sparkled with all the fiery words she was unable to say in such a public space. He wanted to be alone with her. If he couldn't be alone with her, he felt he might perish. The dance ended, and they bowed to one another, but before Jack had even raised his head, Verity had turned and was moving gracefully out of the ballroom towards the terrace. Before Jack could move after her, he felt a friendly hand clap on his shoulder.

“Everything alright, Sussex?”

The groom, Mark Addington, looked at him with a generous smile.

“All well, thank you, Addington.”

The two men watched Verity slip out onto the terrace alone. Jack noticed the glances from the assembled company, but particularly the glare of the Marchioness as she stood at the corner of the ballroom. If he followed Verity now, the Marchioness would surely intervene. Jack let out a rough exhalation of frustration. How he wanted to be with her!

Mark squeezed his shoulder. “What do you need?” he asked, simply.

Jack was too grateful to question how Mark had known, or what it meant for his or Verity’s reputation. He answered without hesitation.

“Keep the Marchioness occupied for me,” he said, eyes on the lone figure still visible through the glass terrace doors. “If you can.”

“I can manage that, Sussex.” Mark smiled gently. “I hope you are on a path to true happiness, my friend.”

Jack nodded as Mark moved away, tactfully blocking the Marchioness’ view of the dance floor. Jack carefully sidled the edges of the room, weaving past the old ladies and retired gentlemen sitting against the walls, until he could slip out of the doors and close them quietly behind him.

Chapter Eleven

Verity stood on the terrace, her hands pressed into the carved marble surface of the wall, her head tipped down so that her curls tumbled forward around her face, lifting and falling with her breath. She felt so warm she could barely breathe, and the cold air felt so good against the hot, irritated skin of her neck. Jack's words rang around her mind, chasing her thoughts in circles. Surely, he must regard her to say such things, but how could he possibly regard her with all those other women he had known? She couldn't help but think of the many dark, alluring Spanish eyes he must have gazed into. The voluptuous, luscious Spanish bodies he must have danced with, and the cherry red French lips he must have kissed. He had known so many other women. How could she possibly compete with them? She felt a sense of injustice and hurt pride welling up inside her. Did he regard her simply as a plaything? A starry-eyed maiden to be wooed and abandoned at will? Did he not comprehend the damage he was doing to her heart?

"Verity?"

She stiffened. Without turning around, she knew it was him. She had heard his voice so many times in her dreams. She couldn't face him now, not when she was so full of emotions. How could she hide her true feelings like this?

"Jack, go away."

"Please look at me. If I have saddened you, I apologise."

He sounded so smooth, so unruffled by their dance that she was filled once again, with anger and frustration at him. How could he be so calm?

"I am not sad!" Verity swung around furiously. "Just please, leave me alone!"

In a moment, he was standing in front of her, grasping both of her hands in his. She tried to step back but felt the firm marble wall behind her. She turned away, trying to stop her heart from thumping when she looked at him.

"Why did you run away from me?" he demanded, his dark hair falling alluringly into his eyes.

"I didn't!" Verity pulled her hands out of his grip and turned on her heels, flying down the stone steps towards a small alcove, away from the prying eyes of the ballroom. She couldn't risk being seen with him, not like this.

"I needed some air and some quiet! That is all!"

"If that is all, why are you running away now?"

Jack's voice was light and amused as he followed her down the steps. The alcove was shaded by a great cypress tree, a small stone lovers seat placed neatly beneath it. Verity cursed herself for inadvertently moving into a more romantic spot.

"Would you like to sit down?" Jack asked politely.

"No, I would not." Verity crossed her arms, trying not to look like a petulant child.

"I have angered you," Jack leaned nonchalantly against the trunk of the great tree, hiding himself in the shadows. "The least you can do is tell me how?"

Verity stood in a pool of moonlight and considered her options. She could lie to him, she could tell him his attentions were misplaced and she loved his brother, but her heart was heavy with all the secrets she already had to keep. Here, in the dark of the alcove, with Jack's face barely visible but for a slant of moonlight, she felt the urge to be truthful. Besides, there was an instinct inside of her, a need to confess herself so that she could, in turn, better understand Jack's feelings. A curious part of her needed to know how he would respond to the truth. She took a deep breath and prayed she was making the right

choice.

“You - you keep looking at me.” Verity answered, with difficulty. “As if we - we were still in the parlour as we were on that evening.”

“Ah.” Jack nodded, crossing his own arms. “You... don’t wish to remember that evening?”

He looked so much the suave debonair prince who cared not what one beautiful girl thought of him that she almost couldn’t go on. But now that she had started, she felt she must at least explain herself. The words tumbled out, almost against her will. There was something about Jack and the encompassing darkness that removed all her inhibitions and propriety.

“I think I shall remember that evening for the rest of my life.” Verity gazed up at the bulbous moon, rubbing her arms gently against the chill for comfort. “I have always remembered everything about you,” she added, softly.

For a moment, she thought he had not heard but then she saw that he was rigid with tension, barely breathing.

“Verity -,” he began, his voice low.

“But I know who you are, Jack Gladstone,” she cut him off quickly, suddenly afraid of his earnest tone. “I know who you have always been and I - I was wrong to expect you to change. I am sorry.”

She had said it now. She could not take it back. She blinked away rising tears and looked back towards the ballroom. “I should go back inside.”

“No!”

Jack grasped her so suddenly that before she knew it Verity had her back pushed against the trunk of the tree and Jack had one hand slammed against the tree trunk by her head, trapping her in his presence.

“Jack!” she exclaimed, but he would not be deterred.

“What do you mean, that you were wrong to expect me to change?” he demanded. “Why should I need to change?”

“Don’t patronise me, Jack!”

She tried to ignore how his closeness made her stomach turn and focused instead on how frustrated he made her feel. The bitter words that had been building inside her since he had sent those insensitive flowers to her bubbled over:

“Do you think I don’t know about your past, the other ladies you have seduced along the way? Well, I do, and I know what it means.”

“And what is that? Do you truly believe me to be some kind of libertine?”

His voice was hoarse. Despite her rage, he hadn’t moved. If anything, the arm that blocked her escape seemed closer to her face, the wool of his coat grazing her cheek.

“No,” she whispered. “But I understand that you are the type of man who leaves a string of heartbroken girls behind you. Can you deny it?”

Jack’s eyes were dark as the night and totally unreadable.

“No,” he said, finally, as if it cost him greatly to speak the words.

“Then let’s not pretend that I am more than a passing fancy to you,” She pushed against his chest, determined to be free. “So please, let me go!”

“What if I’m not pretending?”

Jack took hold of her waist, pulling her closer. She resisted, arching her back, but this only allowed him to slip his arms around her completely. To feel his strong, muscled body so close to hers was enticing, but she wouldn’t let herself be swayed. She needed to keep her head!

“Don’t tease,” she squirmed against him, trying to struggle free but his face was moving closer to hers, his lips perilously near. “It is unkind.”

“What if everything I’ve expressed up to this moment is the truth of my heart?”

Suddenly, it was too much. These were the words she had longed to hear, but she couldn’t trust them. She couldn’t trust him.

“Jack! Stop it!”

She spoke with such authority, in the voice of the girl from his childhood that he did stop, seeming to be shocked by his own reaction. Verity couldn’t help but chuckle lightly at his humble expression.

“You always listened when I used my stern tone as a child, it’s relieving to know it still works.”

Jack didn’t laugh. He didn’t say anything. They stood still, so close that she could feel the steady thump of his heart, her breasts pressed tightly against the crisp linen of his shirt. They were so close that she could see the stubble threatening to come through his freshly shaved chin. She wondered what it would feel like to touch it, that intriguing combination of featherlight skin and firm bristles. Verity couldn’t help it. She lifted a finger and stroked his cheek. Jack froze, and their eyes locked and for a moment, his face was filled with such yearning, such a hungry longing that it took her breath away.

“Jack, I -,”

He kissed her, taking the words out of her mouth, his lips filled with her gasp.

“I listened,” he whispered, his face close to hers so that she could feel his warm, rasping breath on her cheek. “I always listened, I always watched. I always wanted to serve you, to impress you and since we had that first dance all those years ago, to hold you in my arms like this.”

“Oh Jack,” Verity rose on her tiptoes, clutching the lapels of his jacket as she tilted her lips towards his invitingly. “Me too.”

His body pressed against hers, forcing her back against the rough bark of the tree, his hands cradling her head and his thumbs stroking her jaw in a way that made her knees weak. She couldn’t help herself. She

felt an equal fire burning inside her, rushing up to meet him. She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, arching her back against the tree so she could better feel the delightful strength of Jack's hands as they slid around her. His fingers stroking the fabric at the back of her gown. She couldn't stop a small gasp of delight escaping from her lips. The sound seemed to have an electric effect on Jack, whose hands gripped her so intensely it hurt for a moment. Then, as quickly as it had all happened, he pulled away, breathing heavily. He pressed his forehead against her own, his breath urgent and hurried against her face. Verity noticed that his hands against her body were trembling, almost as much as she was.

"Verity, I - I must stop," he brushed his lips against hers one more time and Verity smiled dreamily. "I - I don't want to get carried away, not before ...,"

"Before?"

Verity's heart lifted at his words. Was he perhaps suggesting that they could be more? Might he even...consider making her a proposal? As Verity looked at Jack's heaving chest, his dark curls caught slightly in the breeze across his forehead, she knew she couldn't marry Christian. How could she when Jack had her heart? How could she possibly join his family as his sister when she felt how she felt about him, and when they had been this to one another? What kind of sister would that make her to him? The thought of it turned her stomach. Jack seemed to be struggling with something inside himself too. He ran a hand through his hair and clenched his fist around his dark curls.

"Verity, I - I have something to ask you."

"Yes?"

Verity held her breath. If he asked her, she would say yes, no matter what the cost to her reputation, no matter how things played out with the Marchioness and the Duchess. Nothing would keep her away from him.

"Will you - will you -,"

Jack bit his lip, in an uncharacteristic demonstration of insecurity. He flexed his hands into fists and seemed to instinctively grab her hand. She waited, body tense, as he stared at her hand, his thumb absently

stroking her fourth finger where an engagement ring might sit. Verity couldn't bear it.

"Ask me." She swallowed hard. "Ask me, Jack."

For a long, impossibly stretched moment, neither of them breathed. The night was silent, the wind fell, and Verity felt the world stop. Then Jack dropped her hand and shook his head, mouth curving into a soft smile. Verity's heart fell. She recognized that smile. It was the same one he used in public when he tried to impress others. He wasn't going to ask her, not now, at least. Maybe not ever, and she didn't know how long she could wait for him. If she didn't find a suitor soon, then she knew Martina would not hesitate to release the horrifying information about her parents. Verity's heart lurched to think about how quickly Jack may disappear from her life if it was declared all over town that she was a bastard. Still, she could not quite give up hope.

"Will you accompany me inside?" he asked.

His voice was light but, in his eyes, she saw the familiar tenderness from his kisses. She may doubt his words, but she couldn't doubt the truth in his eyes. He was still her Jack.

She smiled gently. "I would go anywhere with you."

He laughed softly, offering her his arm. "Then back inside, for a start."

Chapter Twelve

You should have asked her, why didn't you ask her? You are a fool to let the moment slip away, how could you do that?

A variation on these thoughts galloped like horses through Jack's mind as he escorted Verity back into the ballroom. They were joined and challenged by a second voice that spoke into his mind just as clearly:

What were you thinking, nearly proposing to her? She is being courted by Christian, she is not for you! She's going to be your sister-in-law! How will you stand at their wedding, be his best man, knowing the feel of her kiss?

He had been so close. The words had been on his lips, it had been all he could do to pull them back, to not say them: *Will you marry me, Verity. Will you be my wife? Will you never leave me?* He felt, deep in his heart, that just as he knew that the sun would rise tomorrow that at that moment, Verity would have said yes. He had a flash of a vision, almost as quick and bright as the lightning that had danced across the sky on the night he had first kissed Verity: He imagined the two of them, arm in arm in the rose garden of Gladstone House, Verity laughing and smiling at him, her bright hair shining in the summer sunlight. He had been so close to having her in his arms forever.

"My dear Duke!"

The Marchioness' voice was shrill to his ears. He felt Verity's fingers instinctively tighten on his wrist.

"Oh God," Jack whispered under his breath, so only Verity could hear. He thought he saw her tight smile, but it instantly vanished when faced with the cold eyes of her stepmother.

“My dear Verity,” the Marchioness glanced over her stepdaughter as if for the first time taking in Verity’s beauty. A crease appeared in her alabaster forehead. “Did you need assistance, Verity? I’m sure Lord Gladstone would have escorted you to the garden, you need not have bothered the Duke of Sussex!”

She gave a tinkling laugh that seemed more piercing than usual.

“I was not bothered,” Jack smiled tersely. “If you’ll excuse me, I will escort Lady Huxley home.”

“Oh?” the Marchioness raised her thin, red eyebrows. “Are you unwell, dear?”

“Yes,” Verity lied. “I - I had an allergic reaction earlier today from some - some flowers I was sent. My skin is sore.”

Jack frowned as her hand rose to her throat. He saw now that it was red and bumpy underneath the pearls. What idiot had sent her Chrysanthemums?

“Oh my, you dear girl! Those flowers were for Daniella, not for you!” The Marchioness smiled frostily and laughed again. “I meant to thank you, Duke, for sending them. We were so flattered by the attention.”

Jack stared at the Marchioness in confusion.

“Flowers? I didn’t send any -,”

“Oh, do not concern yourself with Verity,” The Marchioness laid a thin hand on Verity’s shoulder. “She understands that Daniella often receives gifts from gentlemen.”

Jack felt Verity’s hand withdrawing from his arm. Her face had crumpled, and she was blinking intensely.

“Verity -,”

Jack tried to speak to her, but she turned away, clearly afraid of showing emotion in front of her stepmother. Her voice was remarkably even but Jack noticed the strain in her eyes.

“I shall leave you now, thank you, my dear Duke, for your kindness.”

Verity wouldn't meet his eye. She clearly believed he had sent flowers to Daniella, despite everything they had said to one another in the garden. Did she really believe him to be some sort of cad? His heart sank. As if he would send flowers to anyone else, and the idea of him sending anything with Chrysanthemums to the Huxley estate was ludicrous. He remembered the coughing fit and swoon Verity had fallen into as a child, and still remembered it with fear. There was no way to tell Verity any of this, without revealing himself in front of the Marchioness which he was sure she would never forgive him for. So, he watched helplessly as Verity walked away, her head slightly bowed.

The Marchioness turned to him, her eyes sharp. “I do not think she will make a good match for you, my dear Duke.” She spoke lightly but there was steel behind her gaze. “I am sorry to say she is not worth a great fortune. Her father's wealth was quite depleted by the time of his passing. I do not think she will further the Gladstone estate.”

Jack bristled at this great impertinence that the Marchioness of Huxley, a woman who knew nothing of him or his family, would presume to give him marriage advice.

“Well, I am glad then that it is not your opinion that matters most,” he said, smoothly.

“It could be.” The Marchioness tilted her head like a watchful cat. “My daughter offers much more to a husband. She has a fortune of nearly ten thousand pounds a year, and no entail. Surely that is interesting to you, a man of the world.”

“I think you have very little idea of what is interesting to me, Marchioness.”

“I may do.” The Marchioness' eyes darted from side to side, then she stepped closer.

“It might interest you to know that if you do not take my dear daughter for a walk in the garden, at least give her the same courtesy you extended my ungrateful step-daughter, then I will arrange for other floral bouquets to be delivered to other eligible ladies around London.”

“And so the ladies of London will be blessed,” Jack shrugged. “For I am known for my generosity.”

He was shocked that the Marchioness would go to such lengths to further her daughter’s suit, but not surprised.

“Yet it is not something my stepdaughter would appreciate.” The Marchioness tapped her fingers against her lips in mock questioning. “What might she think if she heard of that?”

Jack took in a deep breath, overwhelmed with the urge to turn on his heel and walk away from the Marchioness. However, the last thing he wanted was for Verity to suffer at the hands of this vile woman. A walk in the grounds with Lady Law was a small price to pay.

“Very well,” he said, bowing elegantly. “I would be delighted to accompany your daughter.”

The Marchioness smiled widely and immediately reached her arm to pluck her daughter from her merry conversation and drag her by the elbow to stand, the look of joy on her face dying quickly away when she saw him, in front of Jack.

“The Duke would like to walk in the gardens.”

The Marchioness pushed Daniella towards Jack, so she stumbled lightly, and Jack automatically reached out to steady her. Over her head, he saw Verity standing by Christian, watching them with pain on her face. Her emerald eyes lingered on the place Jack’s hands met with the ivory satin of Daniella’s glove. Jack tried to smile at her, to reassure her, but when she met his eye she winced. Clearly, he was making everything worse, but what could he do?

“Come, Lady Law,” he said, guiding her outside. “Let us walk together.”

“Very well,” Daniella sighed heavily. “If my mother wishes it, I will obey.”

Jack looked curiously at her, her copper-haired head turned longingly back towards the ballroom. She was silent, almost sulky as their feet crunched on the gravel around the fountain. Jack was so surprised, he was temporarily shaken out of his rage and resentment towards her

and her mother. He was not used to women being so reluctant for his company. It was unusual if nothing else. He tried to start a conversation:

“You are not concerned about walking alone with a gentleman then?”

“Why should I be?” Daniella tossed her red curls and smiled. “Nothing shall come of it.”

“Oh?”

Jack was surprised at this. He had been led to believe by the Marchioness that Daniella was interested in him. However, he would now doubt any word that came from that odorous woman’s lips.

Daniella nodded. “I have no interest in the institution of marriage, and I have little patience for courting.”

“Is that so?” Jack glanced over his shoulder. Even from a distance, he could recognise the haughty silhouette of the Marchioness in the golden light of the ballroom doors.

“So, you only endure it for your mother’s sake?”

“Yes,” Daniella sighed, scuffing her satin shoes against the fountain edge. He saw that her shoe roses were loose and hanging from so many dances.

“Mother is so keen for me to marry, but I doubt it is in my nature, truthfully. I have never been so interested in romance or all those frilly, unnecessary things like other girls.” Daniella wrinkled her nose in disgust. “I don’t even read romance books. They bore me.”

Daniella reminded him in some ways of Christian. He similarly doubted his ability to feel true love. Jack might have thought similarly, a year ago or even a month ago, but now he knew his own heart more intimately. It beat only for Verity.

“You do not consider marriage a necessity, then?”

Daniella laughed, her white teeth shining in the moonlight. “Oh no! My father’s estate belongs entirely to me. I am in possession of a good

fortune and I am content in my own company. What need have I of a husband?"

"I suppose it may not be the need for a husband as such," Jack mused. Daniella was surprisingly interesting company, and not at all like her mother. "But perhaps it is the need for a particular person."

"Hmmm," Daniella looked sceptical. "My mother has never spoken of marriage in such terms, so I suppose I have never considered it. I grant it could be possible."

"It is." Jack looked back towards the ballroom, seeing Verity's eyes in his mind. "I know it."

"Then I am happy for you, Duke." Daniella smiled at him in an easy way. "It seems there is little need for our walk, then."

"Should you like to go back inside?"

"I should," Daniella promptly turned on her heel, directing them back inside. "I have been enjoying the dancing and frivolity - it seems a shame to waste time out in the cold!"

Jack laughed. Daniella Law was a curious woman, but he enjoyed her company. If her mother had hoped that Daniella would ensnare him, her plan had completely backfired. Never had two people probably been less suited. If anything, his conversation with Daniella had only further confirmed the whispers of his heart: Verity was the only woman for him.

Chapter Thirteen

“*T*ry to drink something, Verity.”

Christian pressed a small glass of wine into Verity’s hand, noticing the high colour of her cheeks and chest, and frowned. Perhaps the flush wasn’t entirely due to her humiliation at the way her stepmother had chivvied her aside and literally thrown her daughter at Jack in front of the entire assembly. Underneath her pearls, he could see raised red bumps against her pale skin.

“Did you have an allergic reaction today?”

“Oh, yes, I did.” Verity was distracted, her eyes fixed on the patio doors that Jack and Daniella had walked out of. “Daniella received some flowers today that had chrysanthemums in.”

Christian frowned. “Who would send chrysanthemums to Huxley House? Everyone knows of your allergy.”

“Apparently your brother did.” Verity took a long sip of wine, her eyes sad.

Christian shook his head. “Jack didn’t send any flowers.”

“Maybe he did it without you knowing.” Verity looked away. “They were for Daniella.”

“Perhaps.” Christian doubted it. “But he would never send Daniella flowers, and he knows better than to send chrysanthemums to Huxley House.”

“Well, perhaps he isn’t as considerate as you think he is!” Verity snapped.

Christian raised an eyebrow but said nothing. It was unlike Verity to be so riled up. He wondered what Jack could have done to warrant such irritation from her. Was it possible that Jack has made Verity a proposal of some kind? Was that why she felt so betrayed by the idea of Jack sending flowers elsewhere? Christian knew there was no way on God's green earth that Jack would send gifts to any other woman than Verity.

After the dinner at Huxley House where Jack had tried gallantly in many ways to shield Verity from the Marchioness' overt verbal barbs, Christian had been sure that Jack had fallen hard for his friend. Then there was the way Jack had been stomping around Gladstone Hall, angry and sullen and generally mopey, only made worse by their mother constantly mentioning Verity and her suitability as Christian's wife. A couple of times, Christian had noticed a flare of anger in Jack's eyes, as if he wanted to shout at Christian or even throw a punch at him. Christian half hoped he would. Then at least it would show Jack had finally realised his own feelings and was willing to fight for Verity. But, until he showed that, Christian wasn't going to give anything away. He loved his brother and he believed he would be a good match for Verity, but he had also been flighty in the past. Christian still needed to protect Verity. If Jack wasn't sure enough of his own feelings to be a man and stand up for Verity, then he wasn't the man for her. Perhaps, if Verity couldn't see the good heart behind Jack's indecision and fear, then perhaps she wasn't the woman for his brother. It was frustrating, but Christian believed that if they were truly capable of loving one another, they would find their way.

A sudden scream erupted from the patio, causing a babble of noise to break out in the ballroom. Christian saw Mark Addington and his wife push their way towards the doors and wondered what could be going on.

"Has someone been taken ill?" Christian questioned aloud.

Verity's face was confused. "Isn't Jack outside?"

The two looked at one another and instantly began to shoulder their way through the finely dressed men and women around them. They raised their eyebrows as they heard Mark Addington's angry, raised voice.

"My dear Madame, please calm down -,"

“I shall not calm down, this man assaulted my daughter’s virtue!”

Christian, taller than Verity and most of the crowd, could see over their heads to the patio outside. What he saw made him gasp and force his way between the onlookers with a curse, leaving Verity behind him gasping.

“Lord Jesus!”

Jack looked dishevelled and outraged, standing with the host, Mark Addington in the doorway whilst the Marchioness, her hair wild and face pinched, stood in front of her daughter, Daniella.

“What on earth is going on?” Christian strode to his brother’s side.

Jack looked at him with a baffled expression. “I honestly am not sure.”

“Don’t pretend!” the Marchioness screamed. “You made an attempt on the virtue of my child!”

Jack laughed, staring at her in amazement. “That is astounding!”

“He makes light of it!” The Marchioness turned her fierce face to the astonished company.

“I think my brother expresses surprise at your accusation,” Christian said, quietly. “He is, after all, a member of the aristocracy. It is quite an accusation to make.”

“Indeed!” Mark flustered, glancing nervously at his guests. “And it is hardly the forum! Can we not relocate this discussion -”?

“No!” The Marchioness shouted, all her reason seeming to have evaporated. “No, it shall not stand!”

“Mother, please, stop this!”

Behind the Marchioness, Daniella seemed to be retreating, a fearful expression appearing on her lovely face. Christian would never have doubted his brother’s word, but Daniella’s embarrassed expression could leave no one in any doubt - she had no desire to level these

accusations at his brother.

“Hush, child! I will not stop what is right!” The Marchioness snapped, pushing her only child away with such force that she stumbled.

Christian’s heart went out to her unexpectedly, seeing the way Daniella’s face flushed with hurt and sadness. He couldn’t understand what the Marchioness hoped to gain with this public humiliation, but then he saw the way her eyes darted into the crowd. Out of the corner of his eye, Christian saw Verity standing at the front of the crowd, her pleading eyes fixed on Jack. He saw the Marchioness’ cruel smile as she turned to the general assembly.

“He has defiled my daughter and it will not stand.” The Marchioness’ eyes flew between the angry outrage etched into Jack’s expression and the crestfallen despair in Verity’s face. “He must be forced to marry her! He must be held to account. I demand a proposal - immediately!”

So, this was what it was all about. The Marchioness wanted Jack and saw Verity as a threat. Christian couldn’t even be astonished at the depths the Marchioness would sink. Before he or Jack could say anything in response to the Marchioness, the new Lady Addington emitted a loud sob of despair, her gloved hand flying to cover her mouth. Christian looked at her with pity. Of course, she was mortified. The idea that a scandalous marriage would be announced at her own wedding ball would tarnish her memory of it forever.

“Shona,” Mark started towards his wife, reaching out his hand to her but she stepped back, shaking her head, unable to stop the tears rolling down her pretty face.

“Please excuse me,” she gasped, turning and pushing her way away from them.

“Shona, wait!” yelled Verity.

Verity tore her eyes from Jack, running after her friend. Jack immediately tried to take steps to follow, but Christian clapped a hand on his brother’s arm to hold him in place. When Jack’s face blazed with anger Christian gripped even tighter.

“Do not put fuel on the fire, brother,” he muttered in Jack’s ear. “You are the Duke of Sussex, do not forget it.”

Jack took a deep breath, his face flushed red with anger, but nodded. Even he could see that his reputation was hanging in the balance. The assembly had burst into gossiping whispers as the doors of the ballroom slammed and the sound of a sobbing woman could be heard down the hall.

Christian started to notice that Jack's name was being passed between a few people's mouths in angry hisses, and a few loud calls of, "For shame!" were shouted from the back of the crowd. Christian knew it was time to step in.

"I think it is time we took this discussion into a more private location. I will brook no opposition, *Madame*-" Christian shot the Marchioness a withering glare when she opened her mouth to protest. "- if you want anything from my family, you will not publicly vilify us in this manner."

"Please Mama!" Daniella clutched her mother's twiggy arm desperately. "Please!"

The Marchioness jutted her chin out. "Very well."

Christian closed the patio doors and indicated for the small party to relocate further away from the glass windows, standing in the moonlit flower garden, the cold chill of the night a welcome solace after the heat and prying eyes of the ballroom.

"He will marry her." The Marchioness spun on her heel, those black eyes glinting like coals in a fire. "Immediately. Fetch a priest."

Christian thought he saw both Daniella's and Jack's jaws drop to the floor at her words, however, it was Lord Addington who spoke first.

"My dear Marchioness," His voice was as taut and ringing as a bowstring, "It is my honour as host to ensure that both you and your daughter are properly cared for whilst at my estate, but what you shall not do is impose a shot-gun marriage upon my wife and I on the eve of our own union!"

Christian saw with sympathy that Mark's hands were tightly flexing and releasing as he stared at the Marchioness with all the hate in the world. Even the well-bred Mark was unable to conceal how dearly he would like to strike the Marchioness for ruining his day! Christian laid

a calming hand on the new bridegroom's arm.

"Addington, there is no need for you to remain," Christian muttered. "I will manage this for my brother."

Mark looked at Christian in relief. "You are certain you have no need of me?"

"Quite certain." Christian glared at the Marchioness when she stepped forward to intervene, piercing her in place. "Go and see to your wife."

"Thank you."

Mark shook Christian's hand earnestly, clapped Jack on the shoulder supportively and barely inclined his head to the Marchioness. He caught Daniella's eye before he left and said honestly, "I am sorry for this, Lady Law."

Surprisingly, Daniella swept into a truly phenomenal curtsy, rising elegantly with a toss of her fiery curls to say with equal sincerity, "As am I, Lord Addington. Please, relay my apologies to Lady Addington."

Christian saw the Marchioness throw her daughter a filthy glare, but Daniella seemed not to notice, bowing her eyes respectfully in front of Mark. Lord Addington managed a small smile and a respectful bow in return.

"I will, Lady Law."

He turned and strode back towards the glow of the windows, his long stride crunching in the gravel. The silence fell, cold and angry, as Christian stared at the Marchioness. She stared back, unbowed.

"He will marry her," she said, finally. Her voice was no longer high-pitched or angry, but somehow more deadly. "He has no choice."

"No choice?" Jack exploded. "Who do you think you are, woman, to make these kinds of demands of me?"

"Jack, be quiet." Christian cautioned.

Jack cursed brutally, making the Marchioness smile like a weasel who

had caught its prey. Jack saw her smirk and stopped, turning and walking a few steps away to the fountain. Christian watched as his brother lifted his face to catch the damp breeze of the foaming water and tried to control his temper. Christian turned to Daniella.

“Do you make these accusations against him?”

“It does not matter if she makes them!” the Marchioness snapped. “I have made them!”

“That may be so, Lady Law-Huxley,” Christian softly used her demoted rank. “But your word does not hold up in court. Not unless you claim to have witnessed the incident.”

“I do!”

“Yet we know that to be impossible,” Christian smiled coldly. “You were speaking with Lord Addington whilst Daniella and Jack took their walk in the garden. You could not have seen them.”

“I saw through the window,” The Marchioness waved her hand dismissively.

“You could not.” Christian shook his. “The quality of the light inside the ballroom is so bright and it is so dark out here, it is impossible for you to have seen.”

“None of it matters!” the Marchioness hissed. “I accused him in front of all those people, and I will swear over and over again that it happened. You should know reputation is everything and he is already known as a womanizer - who won’t believe me?”

“If you do this, then I shall ensure you are taken to court for defamation.” Christian spoke clearly, his eyes locked with the monster in front of him. “Your story does not hold up unless your daughter is willing to take the stand against my brother. Are you willing to do that, Lady Law?”

“No.”

Daniella spoke quietly, but her answer was clear. Christian saw Jack look over to her gratefully.

“Her reticence matters not.” The Marchioness stepped closer to Christian. “I will simply say he threatened her. I will say she is afraid. You can take me to trial, Lord Gladstone, but it does not matter if you lose the jury of our peers in society. Who will trust the Duke of Sussex after I have ruined his reputation far and wide?”

“Are you threatening us, Marchioness?”

Christian spoke lightly, but his body burned with rage. Who was this woman who delivered such uncouth, common threats like a street criminal?

“I am simply offering a deal,” she purred, her eyes alight with malice. “Is marriage to a beautiful woman too high a price to pay for your reputation?”

“Yes.”

Jack spoke before Christian could respond. His eyes were scorching with dark fire, his face tight with fury. He stepped up to the Marchioness, glowering down at her.

“Our name and our title will endure long after you’ve finished with your little scandal, and you still will not have what you want. I will never marry your daughter, for even though she is lovely and kind -,” Jack threw a tiny smile at Daniella that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I would never enter into a union of families that included you. So do your worst, Marchioness. No deal.”

Jack turned and left them. Christian knew he would be searching for Verity. He looked at the Marchioness who seemed as if she had swollen a lemon whole. She glared at Christian.

“We shall see,” she seethed. “I shall make him wish he had never returned to England!”

Christian watched at the Marchioness stomped back across the gravel, no doubt to return to the ballroom and continue her malicious diatribe about his brother. He should return to stop it, or at least temper her rumours with a cold dose of truth, but he noticed that Daniella was sniffing slightly, arms tightly crossed.

“Lady Law, are you well?”

“Oh, quite well,” she chuckled sarcastically, blinking away heavy tears.

Christian was surprised by her emotion. Her blue eyes were shining like crystals. Had she perhaps developed a genuine interest in Jack and now mourned his lack of affection?

“I apologise if Jack’s words offended you,” he spoke cautiously. “He thinks highly of you he just doesn’t -,”

Christian stopped speaking because Daniella had started to giggle.

“I’m sorry,” Daniella snorted slightly and pushed her fingers over her mouth. “I don’t mean to -,”

“Do - do you - are you not - not partial to Jack?”

“Him?” Daniella laughed, her crimson hair catching the moonlight as she shook her head. She really was very pretty when she laughed.

“No. I may not be as learned as a man like you, Lord Gladstone, but I have enough presence of mind to notice that the Duke of Sussex is besotted with my stepsister.”

“Then ... then why?” Christian gestured awkwardly to Daniella’s tears.

“Oh, ignore me, these are just tears of frustration.” She wiped her eyelashes with the back of her glove. She pursed her lips, and Christian couldn’t help but notice that they were the softest shade of pink, like the inside of a seashell.

“Because of your mother?”

“Oh, I am used to it.” Daniella glanced away, blushing endearingly. “She has been trying in all manner of forceful ways to get me to make a match for years.”

“You have not liked her suggestions for suitors?” Christian could not imagine that such an attractive young lady struggled for them.

“It is not the suitors,” Daniella glared at him. “It is the suggestion of matrimony itself! Lord in heaven, is it so surprising that a young

woman might disdain the idea of being completely tethered and governed by a man for the rest of her life? After all, gentlemen can remain unmatched for as long as they please!"

Christian held up his hands against her shocking barrage of words. "You need not convince me! I feel people should only marry if deeply compelled by love, and even then -," Christian glanced back towards where Jack had walked away. "It is so much trouble it almost does not seem worth it."

"Agreed," Daniella sighed fervently.

A silence fell between them, but surprisingly, Christian felt quite comfortable in her presence. He noticed the strong lines of her heart-shaped face, the slight frown between her reddish-blonde eyebrows. She was certainly intriguing.

"I suppose we should return to the ballroom."

"And face the scrutiny." Daniella deflated slightly, staring at the winking eyes of the golden windows from the great house above them. "I was having such a pleasant evening too."

Christian felt so sorry for her, her blue eyes wide with regret.

"We could take a stroll in the garden." He glanced over the moonlit grounds. They certainly seemed more appealing to him suddenly, if he could perhaps walk in them with her.

Daniella laughed. "My night was spoiled when I went for a walk with one Gladstone brother, why would I walk with another?"

"Well," Christian offered Daniella his arm with a handsome smile. "This one has no intentions of marriage. I am only a second son, after all. You should be quite safe."

"Well then," Danielle slipped her hand into his arm, her touch sending a warm thrilling charm through his body. "Lead the way, Lord Gladstone."

Chapter Fourteen

Verity held Shona's hand as she wept, flung across the divan in the small private parkour that adjoined her new bedroom in the upstairs of Addington Manor.

"I can't believe this is happening!" Shona cried. "It's - it's my wedding day and - and now it's ruined!"

"I am so sorry," Verity whispered, rubbing her friend's back tenderly. "I don't - don't know what happened."

"Your stepmother happened!" Shona sat up, her eyes were red-rimmed and her nose wet. "What in heaven was she thinking?"

"I don't know," Verity shrugged lamely. "I can - I can only apologise for my father's widow and -,"

"Do no such thing!" Shona snapped fiercely, "As far as I am concerned, she has nothing to do with you or your father. He - he would never have allowed such outbursts!"

"Perhaps she was merely distressed for Daniella,"

Verity tried to seem calm. Inside she was boiling with humiliation at the scene her stepmother had caused and teeming with tremulous emotion at the idea of Jack and Daniella being intimate together.

"Jack Gladstone might be a ladies' man, but he would never assault a young woman." Shona frowned, rubbing her nose with her glove. "I thought you knew him well. I thought perhaps you... that there might be something between you two?"

"So did I." Verity swallowed a lump in her throat. "But when I saw

him with Daniella... and his reputation..." Verity shook away her impulse to cry herself. "Besides, after these accusations he will have to marry her to avoid scandal."

Shona's eyes filled again as she was reminded of the scandal and gossip that had taken place at her wedding ball.

"This will be all people remember! What will Mark think?" Shona sniffed. "What if he regrets our marriage?"

"Shona, how could you think that?" Verity tucked a wayward brunette curl behind her best friend's ear. "Lord Addington is devoted to you in every way, nothing could deter him!"

"My thanks, Lady Huxley." The women turned to see Mark standing in the doorway. "You are correct of course. I hope my bride can know it in her own heart, too."

"Oh, darling!" In one fluid movement, Shona had risen from the bed and flung herself into the arms of her new husband.

Verity looked at Mark hesitantly. She wondered if his previously warm manner towards her would now have cooled with the behaviour of her stepmother, but he only smiled at her with thanks.

"I am grateful to you, Verity, for comforting my wife."

"Of course, my Lord." Verity smiled at her friend tenderly. "She is family to me."

"What is happening?" Shona looked at her husband fearfully, "Are they still fighting?"

"No, no, no," Mark soothed. "Lord Gladstone has it all under control. The Duke of Sussex is -,"

Before he could finish his sentence, a loud knocking interrupted him. Shona frowned.

"Who could it be?"

"Addington! Are you in there? I'm looking for your wife and - and

Lady Huxley?"

Verity jumped up at the sound of Jack's voice, her heart suddenly in her throat. "Don't tell him I am here," she whispered pleadingly, "I - I cannot see him -,"

"Perhaps you should just hear what he has to say," Shona said.

Verity shook her head vehemently. "No! No, I - I can't bear to hear it." The idea that she would have to stand, in their presence, and hear Jack explain that he was bound to marry Daniella was too much to handle. "Please," she turned to Mark. "Is - is there another way out? I must go home."

"Through the bedroom and down the back stairs," Mark answered. "Go quickly."

Verity kissed Shona quickly on the cheek and moved swiftly through the bedroom, stopping at the other door when she heard Jack's voice again.

"Is she here? Have you seen her?"

Verity heard the strain in his voice and for a moment, her hand lingered on the doorknob. What if Shona was right? What if she needed to hear him out?

"No, she left," Mark said truthfully.

"I need to find her, I have to explain -,"

There it was. How could there be an explanation for how Jack had made her feel, and then his attitude towards Daniella? Verity quietly opened the door and slipped down the dark servants' steps, her dancing shoes barely making a sound on the cold stone. Jack's voice receded behind her. Verity tried not to think of him, the way he had taken Daniella's arm to step out for a walk, the way she had blushed at her mother's words about him, her cheeks reddening in the same way Verity's had done underneath Jack's kisses.

She thought of the way Jack had laughed at the Marchioness' words as if the idea of him having to force himself on any lady was beyond

ridiculous. They gave themselves so easily to him. Just as Verity had done. It was only when the footman helped her up into one of the carriages and closed the door behind her that she finally allowed her tears to fall. The sobs wracked her body as the carriage jolted into movement, and Verity found unexpected words escaping her lips:

“How could you do this to me?” she whispered to the cold air, seeing Jack’s smiling eyes and sensuous lips in her mind’s eye. “How could you do this to me? I love you.”

When she spoke the words, she knew them to be true. She loved Jack. Perhaps she had always loved him and like the bulb of a flower, her love had waited, slumbering softly, until it felt the warm sunshine of his affection to blossom. The knowledge gave her no joy, only a more acute taste of pain. For what good was this love, if it could not be returned? He would marry Daniella, and Verity would spend the rest of her life longing for him. Verity curled into a ball, hugging her arms across the bodice of her dress and let her cries of anguish be lost under the sound of thundering hooves.

It was a long ride back to Huxley house, as she rubbed her bare arms against the cold. She had left with such haste she had forgotten her shawl. She was lonely and chilled inside the carriage, but it gave her time to think. By the time the horses pulled up at her father’s estate, Verity knew one thing for certain: she could not stay under the same roof as her stepmother and stepsister anymore. She would leave for the only piece of property she was sure was in her own name and not her stepmothers: her own mother’s childhood estate in Devon. There she would be far away from the gossip of London society and far away from Daniella and Jack’s impending marriage. She would still have time, the whole season, to find a man who might marry her. She couldn’t ask Christian again - she would not survive the pain of becoming Jack’s sister-in-law and being a family spectator to his happiness with Daniella.

She flattered herself that she was moderately attractive and could be engaging. Her reputation would be enough to engage many suitors in Devon. Before long, she would be married and away from Martina’s clutches. She would never see Huxley again. She would never see her friends again. She would never see Jack again, but at least she would not have to watch him marry Daniella. She would not be happy, she knew that, but at least she might, possibly, survive. It was the only way.

Arriving home, she took the stairs up to her bed chamber with a weary slowness, too numb now even for tears. She couldn't imagine that this might be the last time she walked in her childhood home. The thought was painful, almost like a mortal wound that was slowly sapping the life out of her, but it did not make her feel like she would scream in pain. Not like when Martina had commanded Jack marry Daniella. Not like that.

"Mistress, what are you doing?" Trudy asked, gasping as she entered the bedroom and saw Verity in the midst of packing.

"Leaving," Verity said, simply. "I can't do this anymore."

Chapter Fifteen

Trudy stared at her Mistress, surrounded by her gowns and her packing trunks sprung open. Her face was paler than Trudy had ever seen, the redness from her earlier allergic reaction raised and ugly under her glowing pearls.

“Miss, you cannot be earnest!” Trudy cried, closing the door hurriedly behind her.

“I am,” Verity folded gowns with trembling hands. “I can’t stand to live here any longer.”

“You can’t abandon your family home!” Trudy clutched the gowns from Verity’s hands, squeezing her Mistress’ hands tightly. “You know you can’t!”

“You don’t understand!” Verity pulled her hands from Trudy’s grasp and turned away. “Martina made a scene at the ball tonight, such a terrible scene! I am humiliated and hurt and -,” Verity’s eyes glistened with tears. “I can’t do this any longer! I am going to Devon.”

“Devon?”

It was the site of the late Marchioness’ home. It was a country house, not a grand manor, and a decided step down in society for an eligible Lady like Verity. It was barely kept, and the society was hardly equivalent to London. What could possess her to want to go there? Trudy looked at Verity’s unshed tears, making her emerald eyes sparkle brightly. Something else had happened at the ball, Trudy could feel it. Perhaps it was to do with Jack Gladstone, whom Trudy was sure Verity had feelings for. Why else would Martina have arranged to have such thoughtless flowers given to Verity if not to deter her from Jack Gladstone?

“Mistress, I - I think I need to tell you that those flowers that arrived earlier -,”

“They were not for me,” Verity’s voice was tight as she dropped her jewellery into its velvet case. “They were for Daniella. It seems - it seems she will soon be engaged.”

So, Martina had succeeded in driving a wedge between the Duke of Sussex and her Mistress! Trudy could see that Martina’s plan to further exclude Verity from her own inheritance was progressing well, but Trudy knew one way that might just deter it. After the revelations given to her by the other servants, she had not been idle that evening. She had known, in her heart, that Martina was up to something and feeling such a need to protect Verity, had betrayed the code of a faithful servant and acted. She steeled herself to share the truth with Verity.

“Mistress, please sit down.” Trudy pushed gently on Verity’s shoulders, so she slumped, holding her travelling coat, onto the ottoman at the end of the bed. “I need to show you something.”

“What is it, Trudy?”

Trudy reached into the pocket of her serving dress and pulled out a leather-bound book.

“Father’s journal!” Verity gasped.

Trudy nodded, her heart thumping heavily as she hoped Verity wouldn’t be angry with her. What she had done was unforgivable, truly, but she had only done it out of love.

“I took it from your stepmother’s room.”

“Why did you do that?” Verity cried. “If she catches you, she will have a good reason to end your employment!”

“Mistress, I have never believed what your stepmother said about your mother’s... indiscretions,” Trudy carefully laid the journal on Verity’s lap. “I knew your mother -,”

“You were only a girl when she was alive,” Verity shook her head.

“How could you possibly have known the intimacies of their marriage?”

Trudy didn't know how she could explain to Verity all the various intimacies that even young serving girls were privy to in grand houses such as this. Ladies and gentlemen always presumed that their polite mannerisms created invisible protection of their private lives from their household, but the truth always was that whoever cleaned your bedpans and dressed you were the people who saw all your secrets. If anyone would have known that the late Marchioness had a lover, it would have been her lowly chambermaid, the girl Trudy. Instead of saying all this, Trudy sat beside her young Mistress, the child she had helped grow and flourish into a woman, and sighed, ready to admit her greatest sin.

“My dear, I have read the pages of your father's journal regarding his early relationship with your mother. I did not read it all, of course, only the relevant portions. I - I would never expect you to betray him by doing it yourself, so I - I had to -,”

“I understand,” Verity interrupted. “Please continue.”

Trudy was grateful for her Mistress' acceptance, for Trudy was sure she could never forgive herself for betraying her late master, no matter how much she reasoned it was for the good of his daughter. Trudy pushed that feeling aside and ploughed ahead.

“Well, Miss, there is no sign of any sadness or distrust between them, and I saw nothing to imply it in the time I knew them. None at all. He writes that they spent every night in each other's company, and I remember it. Even when your father was on business, your mother always went with him. They could not bear to be parted, even for one night.”

“Trudy, she says she has letters my mother wrote. Why would she lie?”

Because she is more cruel and more evil than a sweet, sheltered child like you could ever imagine! Trudy thought, darkly. She felt she could probably list one hundred reasons that twisted woman had to lie, but Verity would not accept that as anything other than slander. She needed facts.

"I cannot comment on her reasons, but I swear, I didn't see the letters in here or find a single reference in your father's journal to having found them." Trudy shook her head. "And even if she could produce letters, I would deny their validity until the day I died."

"You would?" Verity looked at her with such pleading eyes that Trudy felt her own heart squeeze.

"I would," Trudy reached for her hand and held it tightly. "They loved one another, Verity, and your mother was devoted to your father. I have no doubt in my mind, no doubt in my heart that you are your father's child. Aside from your eyes, which are all his, you have his gentleness of manners, his generosity of spirit. No one who knew him could deny you were his, and his alone. Please, don't be pushed out of your home and what is rightfully yours."

Tears slipped down Verity's face as she gripped Trudy's hand, her lower lip wobbling. Trudy couldn't fight her instinct. She pulled Verity towards her softly, letting her pretty blonde head rest against her breast as Verity's tears wet the front of her apron. Trudy closed her own eyes tightly, holding her tears back. When she was just a chambermaid, Verity had come into the world. Trudy had stood above her cradle, only a girl of twelve years old herself, and wondered with awe at the tiny baby's pearly skin, and fine, soft hair that glinted red like strawberries in the morning light. Trudy had loved her instantly, and that love had never faded.

"Thank you," Verity's breath was hot against her neck, and she rubbed her cheek against the fabric of Trudy's dress, just as she had done when she was a little girl. "I really needed to hear that. I - I feel so lost."

"Don't lose hope," Trudy whispered. "Whatever that woman says, you are your father's daughter."

"Verity!"

Trudy gasped as the harsh reverberations of Martina's shout echoed up the staircase.

"Quick! Hide the journal!" Verity whispered, standing and rushing to the door. "I don't want her to see I am leaving!"

Trudy stuffed the black book under a pillow on the bed, and followed her Mistress to the door, carefully blocking the view of Verity's upturned room with her body as she cautiously closed the door behind her back. Martina stood at the bottom of the stairs, pulling off her gloves with snapping movements.

"Yes?" Verity did not even attempt to coat her voice with its usual respectfulness.

Martina smiled coldly. "You seem unhappy, Verity."

"I am," Verity said, and Trudy noticed the way her neck was straight with tension, her usually full mouth a thin, angry line. "I am unhappy with the way you represented my family, and my father, this evening."

"Well, dear," Martina slapped her gloves down on the gilded table by the stairs. "I have to wonder if you are able to comment on the reputation of this family since your paternity is so questionable."

Trudy riled at Martina's words. She tossed them at Verity so easily, uncaring about the doubt and pain they were sowing in the young woman before her.

"I do not believe your accusations," Verity spoke quietly, but her words carried across the great space of Huxley Hall. "I do not think others will either. My father loved my mother, as he never loved you, and he loved me also. You are filled with bitterness, but it cannot sour what my parents had together."

Trudy held her breath as Martina stared at Verity, a cold, calculating look on her face. Trudy thought that Martina had not anticipated Verity's inner strength and courage.

"It matters not what you believe, my poor naive girl. It matters what I tell others. I swore to you I would release the information I have," Martina pulled out a sheaf of letters from the bosom of her dress. Trudy glared at them, sure in her heart that they couldn't be genuine. "I have no qualms about it, and since our arrangements have progressed, I will renounce you publicly unless you make a match." Martina hesitated, savouring the pain she was inflicting. "*Tomorrow.*"

"Tomorrow?" Verity's voice was hollow. "I see you have developed a

more urgent need to discard me.”

“Indeed, I have,” Martina’s white teeth shone in the candlelight. “Nothing will come between my daughter and the Duke of Sussex, least of all you.”

“Mama?”

All three women turned. Daniella was standing in the side doorway, her cheeks flushed from the cold night air. Her eyes were wide in surprise.

“Mama, what’s going on?” She stared between her mother’s smug face and her stepsister’s harrowed expression.

“Nothing, dear.” Martina lied smoothly. “I’m just making young Verity aware of your wedding arrangements.”

“But Mama, I don’t want -,”

“Silence, Daniella!”

Trudy was surprised to hear Martina call her daughter by her first name - usually, she was so intent on enforcing her daughter’s status - but saw that Martina’s jaw was ticking with stress. Trudy realised, with a sudden rush of hope, that Daniella was the only person in Martina’s plan who could defy her. If only she could be persuaded to betray her, Trudy mused, gazing at the beautiful heiress.

“You have lost, Verity,” Martina turned her attention back to her stepdaughter, glaring up at her cold, steady stance. “You have lost this estate to me, you have lost the Duke of Sussex to Daniella, and soon you will lose your reputation if you don’t go quietly. Now, be a good little girl and run back to your *friend*, Lord Gladstone, and throw yourself on his pity.”

Martina’s lip curled nastily. “It will be the only thing you have left after I expose you.”

Silence filled the grand hall. Martina’s threat was so extravagant in its terror, so hideous, there seemed to be nothing anyone could say to follow it. Trudy looked at her Mistress’ face and saw only a mask. The

young, carefree child she had loved and served was gone and in her place were the cold, dead eyes of a beaten woman. How dearly Trudy wanted to step forward and take Verity into her arms to comfort her like a daughter! Yet she held her place, honouring her Mistress' silence and glaring, with all the hate she had, down at the pinched face of the woman trying to bring her down. Finally, Verity spoke.

"Of course, Lady Law-Huxley," Verity spoke with all the gentility of her breeding, her voice as cool and chipped as ice. The insult in her refusal to address her stepmother appropriately was perfectly delivered. "Now, if you may excuse me. I must retire for the night."

Trudy's heart could have burst with pride as she watched Verity drop into the most elegant of curtsies, as regal as a princess, before she floated past Trudy and back into her bedroom, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Verity!"

Trudy turned to see Daniella moving towards the stairs, clearing intent on following her stepsister before she was caught in her own mother's claws.

"You will not speak to her," Martina hissed, pulling Daniella's face close. "You will not look at her, you will do nothing! And you will marry the Duke of Sussex, or I swear, daughter, I will pull you down too!"

Martina released her daughter and stalked away to the library. Trudy watched, with the helpful invisibility afforded to servants, as Daniella clutched the place on her bare arm where her mother's nails had dug into her skin and then slowly, sank down to sit on the stairs, head in hands.

"What am I going to do?" Trudy heard her whisper.

Stealthily, cautiously keeping one eye on the door of the library, Trudy snuck down the stairs to lower herself, carefully and silently, to sit beside Daniella. She saw the red, crescent moon shapes that Martina's clutches had imprinted on Daniella's alabaster skin with pity. Enough was enough.

"Miss, you must do something," Trudy breathed softly, so only

Daniella could hear. “You are the only one strong enough to stand up to your mother. You must be the one to oppose her.”

“Why? Why not someone else?” Daniella’s eyes were wet with tears. “She has behaved monstrously, but ... but she is still my mother. Why must it be me?”

Trudy swallowed the bitter rage she felt building at the woman who had rushed, like a destructive force, into all of their lives, damaging everyone she touched. Even her own child.

“Because you are the only enemy she will never see coming.”

Chapter Sixteen

Verity stared at the outside of Gladstone Manor, aware that the doorman was waiting for her expectantly, the interior of the house dark and ominous against the bright sunshine of the June day outside. She had deliberately worn the most beautiful day dress she owned; a soft pink silk gown with a lace and organza overlay that made the fabric look like it was drifting with gentle cream and white flowers. There was a chance that she might see Jack on this errand, and since she was coming to beg Christian for his hand in marriage, she at least wanted to look worthy of him.

She had spent all night packing her luggage, silently formulating a plan. Verity knew this meeting could only go one of two ways: Either Christian would say yes, and she would demand that for the duration of their engagement she would immediately relocate to one of the Gladstone estates outside of London, safely tucked away from Martina's reach and the sight of Jack and Daniella, or Christian would say no, and Verity would immediately retreat to Devon and prepare for Martina's inevitable backlash. Either way, Verity was determined not to spend another night under the same roof as Martina, even if it meant sacrificing her own home, her own happiness, and her one true love. She shifted the pastel pink sash under her bust, patted her curls to make sure they were in place and squared her shoulders.

"Unto the breach," she said to herself quietly, before walking daintily up the stone steps.

"Lady Huxley!" The Duchess happened to be supervising an arrangement of flowers in the entrance hall and looked at Verity with surprise. "How lovely to see you!"

"You also, Duchess." Verity sunk into a respectful curtsey. "I have an appointment with Lord Gladstone."

“Oh, Christian is in the study.” The Duchess smiled gently. “Let me call for him, I can arrange for the four of us to take tea.”

“Four of us?”

“Jack is out on the estate, but he will be back shortly.”

“No, if you please, Duchess, I shall just have a quiet word with Christian.” Verity’s heart had thumped painfully at the idea of sitting for tea with Jack and his mother. “Please excuse me.”

“Of course,” the Duchess murmured, her eyes tracking Verity as she followed a servant down the corridor to Christian’s study.

“Enter!” Christian called through the heavy oak door. The servant held the door open for Verity and she strode in.

“Verity!” Christian looked up from his work in surprise, glancing over the rim of the spectacles he wore when studying for long hours. “Was I expecting you?”

“I don’t think so.”

Verity walked into the room, taking in the decor. She had never spent time in the study of the Gladstone Manor. Before the late Duke of Sussex had passed, the study had been his domain, but Verity could see that the room suited Christian. It was lined with many, beautiful bookshelves full of leather-bound volumes and dominated by a gargantuan mahogany desk that Christian now sat behind. Clearly, whilst Jack had taken over the title of Duke of Sussex, Christian was doing a lot of the legal and administrative work of the estate. He looked at home there, in charge of the running of a great and prestigious business.

“What can I help you with, Verity?”

“I need an answer.” Verity swallowed hard, facing Christian. “I need to know if you accept my proposal of marriage.”

Christian surveyed her over the top of long, tented fingers without speaking. Verity held her breath. Was he going to refuse her? He was her best friend. Surely, surely he knew she would never ask this of

him - unless she was truly, truly desperate.

“So soon?” Christian asked finally. “I thought you had the whole summer to decide.”

“The timescale has - has become more pressurised.”

“What does that mean?” Christian rose and came around his desk, gesturing for Verity to join him on the cushioned window seat. She sat carefully, the sun warm on her face. Christian looked at her with such empathy and concern, she was not sure how she could stand to admit to him what Martina had demanded of her.

“I need to determine my marriage today,” Verity twisted her fingers together, her words spilling out. “Martina has made it very clear. I need to - to secure an engagement -,” she swallowed hard, her cheeks burning with humiliation, “-today or she will release the evidence of my paternity.”

“Today?” Christian pulled his glasses off, rubbing the red mark they had left on the bridge of his nose. “That woman moves fast when she doesn’t get what she wants, I’ll give her that.”

“What does that mean?” Verity frowned.

“Nothing.” Christian shook his head. “She is a cruel woman to do this.”

“She is a lot of things,” Verity conceded, sourly. “But she never makes threats she doesn’t mean. So ...” she let her words fade, raising her eyes hopefully to Christian’s. “Do you have an answer for me?”

Christian sighed. “I had hoped there would be no need for this conversation, that circumstances might have changed but ...”

Verity felt her heart fall inside her chest. She heard a strange ringing in her ears. He was going to refuse her, she knew it already.

“You - you do not want to marry me?” She croaked.

“No,” Christian looked at her frankly. “I do not want to marry anyone, least of all someone who I care for deeply, but who can never love

me.”

Verity closed her eyes against the truth in his words. If she was a true friend to Christian, she would never have put him in this position. She had known all their lives that he had different priorities, less traditional desires when it came to a partnership. If she truly cared for his happiness then she would honour that, but she couldn't help herself. She felt too broken and heartsick to be honourable.

“Does it matter?” She breathed out a ragged breath, keeping her eyes closed. She didn't want to look at him as she begged. “We are friends, best friends, we would not hurt each other or break each other's hearts. That's more than many marriages.”

“But is it enough?” She felt Christian's cool, strong palm rest against her cheek, forcing her to open her eyes. “Would it be enough for you, Verity? Especially when - I think - you know how true love feels?”

He had discerned her feelings for Jack. She opened her mouth to deny it but was met with Christian's wry smile. There was no use pretending with her best friend: he saw her clearer than she saw herself.

“Since I cannot have true love, perhaps this is the next best thing,” Verity whispered, choking down her tears. “And it will protect my parents, their reputation. I - I don't know what else to do -,”

“Verity, my dear, shhhh.”

Christian suddenly pulled her close, holding her in his arms so she could weep, and weep freely. Christian had not embraced her like this since they were children when they were permitted to be much freer with their affections. In those days, he would hold her tight when she fell in the garden and cut her knee or would kiss her head when another girl made her cry. It had been years since he had comforted her in this way and the familiarity of it, the sensation of it reminded her so powerfully of being held by her father that she couldn't help clutching his arms like a drowning girl and burying her wet face in the scratchy, leather-scented wool of his jacket.

“Verity,” he murmured into the top of her head, his consoling hand stroking her curls. “I know you feel lost right now, but it is my belief that you need to stand up to your stepmother and for want of a better

phrase, call her bluff.”

“You cannot be serious!” Verity pulled away, sniffing. “I cannot possibly take such a risk with my parents’ reputation!”

Verity rubbed her nose against the back of her hand in a very unladylike fashion. Christian pulled a monogrammed handkerchief from his top pocket and offered it to her. Verity took it and blew hard. Christian smiled.

“Of course you feel that way, my dear.” He patted her hand gently. “But I am positive they would disagree. All they would want for you is your happiness in life, their reputations be damned!”

His words gave her hope, a warmth that spread from her heart, but then she remembered Jack and sighed heavily.

“I don’t think my happiness can be achieved.”

She thought of Jack’s smile, his dark eyes flashing in the moonlight. All she wanted with all her soul was him, and now he was out of reach from her.

“I truly believe that Martina’s words and accusations would fall upon deaf ears, especially if you can take legal action against her,” Christian spoke clearly. “I can help you with this, Verity. I am certain that there are misnomers in your stepmother’s revelation that must be uncovered.”

“How?” Verity asked, bleakly. “I - I do not even know where to begin.”

“Here.” Christian rose and crossed to the desk, sorting through papers until he pulled forth a letter.

“I have been corresponding with your father’s lawyer, who has spoken to some of your father’s old friends in the city. I have done this all discreetly, of course.” Christian laid the letter on the seat beside her. “I have told them nothing of the true meaning behind my inquiries, only that you may be in some trouble concerning the validity of your claim on the estate. They are all eager to come to your aid.”

“They are?”

Verity’s eyes swam as she looked at the list of names the lawyer had assembled in his missive. There were so many of them. She recalled the kindness of each of these men’s faces and was touched. They both remembered her and wished to help her.

“You are not alone, Verity,” Christian spoke quietly above her. “You do not have to shoulder the burden of your stepmother’s cruelty by yourself. Let others help you.”

Verity sat with the truth of his words for a moment. There was relief hidden inside them, that perhaps there was maybe a way forward in which she did not have to marry immediately, and, not in a way in which she did not have to cause hurt to her best friend. For whilst no happiness could be found for her without Jack, there was still hope for Christian.

“I - I will try.” Verity held the letter tightly and looked up at her friend bravely. “But I will still need to leave the county. I shall go to Devon.”

“What for?” Christian exclaimed. “Martina’s claims are erroneous and with the help of these gentlemen, will be proved so!”

“That may be true, and I pray for it.” Verity folded the letter back into its envelope with shaking hands. “But until that comes to pass, I can only live in London through Martina’s good graces. The estate is hers entirely, except for my mother’s house which my father explicitly left me. I shall have to go there until my name, and the reputation of my father has recovered.”

“You could stay here!” Christian knelt before her.

“No!” Verity shook her head vehemently, her tears rising again. “I could not, Christian, I could not see... them.”

“Them?”

“Your brother and Daniella.” Verity sighed and closed her eyes against the vision of Daniella walking down the aisle. “It is too much for me, Christian.”

“Then Jack did not... he did not ... declare himself?” Christian spoke awkwardly but held her gaze with his soft grey eyes.

Verity shook her head. “No, and what should it matter? He can hardly survive the scandal of refusing Daniella, not after...”

Verity closed her eyes again, unable to summon the words to speak of what may have happened between Daniella and Jack for Martina to be so secure, so confident he would have to marry her. Christian said nothing. Perhaps, Verity thought, he was trying to think of a way to defend his brother, but there was nothing to be said. Jack was the Duke of Sussex. Even if he did not care for Daniella with the same intensity that he had shown Verity, it did not matter. He had a title to defend. Just like she did.

“I will go to Devon.” Verity said, decidedly. “Until I can prove my birth right.”

“I do not like to think of you all alone down there, with no friends to lift your spirits,” Christian said, taking her hand. “Will you let me accompany you?”

Verity imagined for a second how relieving it would feel to have Christian by her side, but then shook her head. “I think not,” she squeezed her friend’s hand tightly. “We are not engaged, after all. It would not be proper, and might - well, it may do more harm than good. With what Martina has in store, the slander she has prepared for me, I must be above reproach and -,” Verity swallowed hard, “-I shall probably have to look for a husband to support me.”

“I can be your ambassador in this,” Christian said softly, “I shall endeavour to find someone worthy of you, who shall love you with the fire of a thousand suns and live and die for you. It is what you deserve.”

“Will it be what they deserve, though?” Verity whispered, a single teardrop falling on their entwined hands. “To love a woman who can only offer half her heart?”

Christian smiled tenderly. “You have more heart than anyone I have ever known. Half would be more than enough for any man.”

“Thank you.” Verity smiled tremulously. “You shall make some

woman very happy one day.”

“I doubt such a woman exists,” Christian laughed, but then his eyes became shadowed. “Or would ever want me.”

“Do not be absurd!” Verity tapped the back of his hand lightly in reproach. “You are more worthy of a good woman than any other man in the country. I shall not hear otherwise!”

They laughed together for a moment, and Verity felt some of her old levity returning, but the moment passed quickly and the enormity of what she would have to do when she returned to Huxley settled on her shoulders.

“I must go,” she rose slowly, brushing her gown down. “Do my eyes look red? I should hate for your mother or the servants to know I had been crying.”

“You look perfect.” Christian smiled, chucking her under the chin. “As always. No, keep it,” he said, as she tried to return his handkerchief. “I shall collect it from you the next occasion I see you.”

“You will come to Devon?”

She slipped her hand into his arm as he escorted her out of the study and towards the front doors. She thought if Christian would promise to visit her, if she had her good friend’s word to hold onto, then perhaps, just maybe, she would make it all the way to Devon in one piece.

“I will always visit wherever you are,” Christian assured her. “Always.”

“Thank you.”

They stood on the step and watched the carriage pull around, the footman jumping down to open the door. A summer breeze kicked up around them as they gazed down the palatial steps and across the Gladstone gardens to the great lake and long drive across the green lawn that led arriving visitors to the spectacular pillars and golden stone frontage of the manor. Verity took a deep breath, trying to savour it. It may be a long time before she returned. She turned suddenly and lifted herself onto her tiptoes to do something she had

not done since she was a tiny girl: she kissed Christian on the cheek. His eyes widened as she did so, and his usually wry smile was replaced by the genuine grin of his childhood years.

“You have always been my most faithful friend,” Verity clutched his hands. “Thank you for everything.”

Christian bowed low to her, reverentially, as if she were royalty.

“It has always been my honour and my blessing,” he said, quietly. “But I consider it a lifetime appointment, Verity. Don’t be dismissing your faithful friend now.”

Verity couldn’t help but laugh, the joyous sound of it bouncing off the stone pillars and echoing over the lawn.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” She said, forcing some of her old banter into her voice for her dear, old friend. “Keep well, my dear Christian.”

She turned and stepped into the carriage, knowing that Christian watched her go with all the care of a brother. He waited on the stone steps until Verity’s carriage had left the park, hearing slow but dignified footsteps approaching behind him.

“She has left?”

“Yes.” Christian sighed as his mother joined his side. “In quite a state, I am sorry to say. She is determined to leave for Devon to protect her reputation. That woman,” Christian shook his head. “The Marchioness, she is a piece of work.”

“Indeed.” The Duchess’ hand clenched on her walking stick. “I should very much like to see that money-grabbing, undignified, good for nothing -,”

“Mother -,”

“*Woman* brought down.” The Duchess took a deep breath. “You told Lady Huxley about the lawyers?”

“I did. She will be in good hands.”

“And Jack?”

“Apparently he has made no declaration.”

The Duchess clicked her tongue, aggravated. Ever since she had seen Jack's eyes follow Verity across the ballroom two nights ago, she had known that Verity was destined for her eldest son, not Christian. Luckily, Christian had wasted no time in letting her know that he would never see Verity as more than a beloved sister. He had also enlightened her as to the more heinous elements of the current Marchioness of Huxley's bribes and schemes towards the young woman the Duchess looked on as already an extension of her family.

The Duchess had been outraged, and she had immediately revealed to Christian the name of the old Marquess' personal barrister so that he might make inquiries on the behalf of poor Verity. However, both she and her cunning son had agreed there was only so much they could do. For Verity to truly understand the transformation she had wrought in Jack's heart from a debonair ladies' man to a devoted suitor, the revelation of his true feelings must come from the young Duke himself. Before he passed, the late Duke had cautioned his wife against exerting too much matriarchal control over her son.

“In order to lead, he must first lead himself,” the old Duke had rasped. “Do not take the opportunity to learn his own strength away from him. His decisions, his choices, his mistakes must all be his own.”

Mistakes had been made, that was for sure, but she was confident that the daughter of Marquess Huxley was the right and only suitable woman to become the next Duchess of Sussex. All that was left was for her eldest son to step into his father's shoes and fulfil not only his birth right but the truest desires of his heart by asking Verity for his hand in marriage.

As she looked across the lawn, the keen eyes of the dowager Duchess spied the dark head of her firstborn as he strode manfully across the grass from the shadows of the rose arbour. His face was a storm of anger and his gaze was fixed on his little brother.

“Here comes Jack now,” Christian's eyes followed her own and he nodded. “I believe he may have noticed Lady Huxley's parting gesture towards you.”

“Is that so?” Christian lifted his hand to shade against the sun. “You are right, mother, he looks to be in a right old state.”

“This might be just what we need,” The Duchess squeezed her youngest son’s arm, conspiratorially. “I shall make myself scarce. Don’t let him off easy.”

“I shan’t, mother.” Christian murmured. “I believe my brother and I are overdue for a conversation.”

Chapter Seventeen

Jack had seen the kiss. Even from a distance, he would have known Verity anywhere. Her blonde hair shone with a reddish tinge in the summer sunlight, and her pink dress rippled like a wedding gown as she stood at the top of the steps. It was bad enough that Christian had not sent anyone to fetch him when she arrived, knowing how badly he had parted from Verity on the night of the ball, but the kiss had been the worst betrayal. He had seen the way she had risen, on her tiptoes, and pressed her lips to his brother's cheek. He recalled the incredible soft pressure of Verity's lips. He recalled the scent of her hair when her face was that close: the heady perfume of jasmine and rose. He recalled how it felt when she raised herself on her tiptoes to press her mouth against this, warm and inviting. All these things, he felt in his soul, belonged to him and him alone. That he should have to share them with Christian was unbearable. He watched her laugh, hating Christian for causing it when the last time he had seen her, he knew he had only caused her distress. He saw the way she smiled at his brother, with a tenderness that made his own heart squeeze and he knew he could not, he could never allow Christian to have her as his wife.

"Verity was here?" Jack asked, coming to stand at the bottom of the steps, his brother standing above him, arms crossed.

"She was."

"You didn't see fit to tell me?" Jack tried to keep his voice level.

"Her appointment was with me, alone." Christian spoke breezily, but his grey eyes were sharp. "Mother didn't even join us."

"Indeed?"

Jack's stomach dropped with dread. His mind raced over the conversations he had sat through over the last two nights, the times Christian and his mother had discussed engagements. Was it possible that Christian had made a proposition to Verity?

"Might I know the content of this appointment?"

"Of course," Christian smiled at him. "She asked me to marry her."

"What?"

Jack's words had left his mouth in an angry shout before his brain could even process it. Christian had turned and walked back through the doors to the house, his hands folded casually behind his back.

"What did you say?" Jack shouted, chasing his brother up the stairs.

"I think I shall take some tea," Christian mused.

"You'll answer the damn question!" Jack yelled, following his brother into the parlour. "Are you engaged?"

"What concern is it of yours?" Christian asked, turning to face his brother with eyebrows raised.

"You - you are my brother!" Jack spluttered, "I am the Duke of Sussex! I have to approve any marriage you have!"

"And you disapprove of Verity?"

Christian maintained an incensing slight smile, as if Jack's evident distress was no more than slightly amusing to him. It made Jack want to strangle him with his tie.

"Of course I don't disapprove of her!" Jack gritted his teeth angrily. "I disapprove of you marrying her!"

"Am I not suitable for her?" Christian crossed to the table, ringing the small bell. A servant appeared, and Christian smiled at them. "Good afternoon, might I have some tea?"

"That's not the point." Jack's jaw ticked with fury as Christian

carefully took a blue and white cup from the servant. Jack fought the urge to knock the china across the room.

“Why should I not marry her?”

“Because it is ridiculous!” Jack exclaimed, his chest tight with all the things he could not say boiling inside him.

“How so?” Christian took an infuriatingly loud sip. “She is eligible, I am eligible, I have known her all my life and trust her, we are fond of one another -,”

“Fond? Fond of one another?” Jack threw his hands up. “Is that all you wish for? Do you not love her?”

“Of course I do.”

Jack flinched as if he had been hit. Hearing his brother’s feelings for Verity made him want to scream, want to beat him to a pulp and cast him from the family, but he knew he was the one in the wrong. Verity had always been intended for Christian, of course Christian loved her! But Verity, Jack knew it in his heart, did not feel the same.

“So why should I not have her?”

“Because she does not love you!” Jack exploded, his words reverberating like a gunshot around the room. He expected Christian to flinch, he expected him to deny it, to be saddened by this revelation of his future bride but he simply took another enraging sip.

“I do not see why that is an issue,” Christian swallowed his tea.

“You don’t see?” Jack tugged his hair, resisting the urge to shake his brother. “For God’s sake, Christian, she is in love with another man!”

“For now. It is unrequited.”

“How would you know that? The affection she feels -,” Jack swallowed painfully, trying to control his temper. “- it could be returned.”

“But it has not been declared.” Christian shook his head patronisingly,

wagging an enraging finger. Jack stopped himself from breaking it. "She has said so, and why should she wait?"

Jack's heart stopped. Had Verity really given up on him after the ball? Had she truly felt so dejected, so unloved, she felt the need to ask for his brother? Did she truly doubt him so badly? God, if only he had been able to explain!

"Perhaps he will declare." Jack flicked his eyes away. "In time."

"There is no time. She must marry immediately, by the order of her stepmother."

"Why?"

"That is not for me to say." Christian twiddled his fingers above a selection of biscuits. "It is a private matter. It is her decision who she discloses that information to."

Jack felt as if he were a volcano about to erupt. The idea that Verity had secrets she kept from him, secrets Christian was privy to, was completely unbearable.

"Even if she needs to marry, she will not marry you." Jack clenched his fists, his nails digging painfully into his palms. "I will not permit it."

"Will not permit it?" Christian set down his cup. "I really do not understand this unreasonable attitude, who else could make her as happy?"

"Me, goddammit!" Jack grabbed his brother by his jacket and forced Christian against the wall, his anger overwhelming him. "I love her! I will not see her married to anyone else, even you!"

"I know that."

"You what?" Jack stared at him blearily, barely comprehending his words.

Christian reached up and gently detached Jack's clenched hands from his lapels, smoothing the wrinkled fabric.

"I know that you love Verity. I am glad to finally see that you know it too."

"I - I don't -," Jack fell back from his brother, staring at his own hands in horror. "God, Christian, I am so sorry, I don't know what came over me!" He sunk heavily into a chair, cradling his head in his hands.

"I do."

He felt Christian take a seat beside him, aware of him crossing his long legs and leaning back reflectively in his own chair. "You love Verity and you were scared you would lose her."

"God," Jack felt his voice crack in his throat. "You are right. I - I am terrified that I have lost her already."

"Why would you think that you had lost her?"

"Because she asked for you!" Jack glared up at his maddeningly calm brother. "Why didn't she ask for me?"

"She doesn't know you love her, Jack," Christian spoke with such tenderness that the gentle presence of his younger brother was suddenly immensely comforting. "You must tell her."

"So, you - you didn't accept her proposal?" Jack stared up at his brother hopefully. His heart lifted when he saw Christian laugh, throwing his usually severe head back with a great guffaw.

"Would I do that to you, when I can see that you are all in all to one another? No brother, I would not be so dismissive." Christian shook his head. "Jack, I thought you knew this, but it seems I must be explicit: I believe I shall never marry."

"Never?" Jack frowned. He knew his brother had unconventional views on partnerships, but he had no idea it had extended so far. Christian nodded, his grey eyes were cold.

"Whilst you were abroad, I thought much about my place in our family, my place on this estate." Christian glanced out of the window, instinctively taking stock of the great lawns and gardens that created the beautiful vista. "The life I love does not suit a wife, Jack. I enjoy

managing our estates and businesses, but I knew that whilst you were travelling in Europe, I was tethered to Gladstone Manor. I knew in my heart it wasn't my destiny. What I desire is philosophy, the law, travelling and managing our affairs around the country and the world."

"You can have those things with a woman," Jack pointed out. He knew that if Verity decided tomorrow that she wanted to leave England forever, he would follow her no matter what. When you loved someone, you never leave their side.

"You don't understand. You have found a partner who compliments you but I -," Christian shook his head. "I do not think such a woman exists for me. Besides, I have no desire to marry anyone, least of all Verity."

"I thought perhaps things had changed," Jack's muscles tensed instinctively when he remembered the smiles Verity would give his brother, the tender kiss she had just now bestowed on him. "You are so fond of one another and you - you just told me you loved her." He frowned at his brother. "Do you not love her?"

"Of course I do." Christian leaned forward, staring at his brother seriously. "I don't think you understand this. I love Verity as much as I love you, as much as I love Mother. She is my best friend in the world, Jack, and we are family to one another. To marry her would be ..." Christian shook his head disbelievingly. "It would be impossible. It would be... madness. Especially when her true heart has been already given elsewhere."

"You believe that?" Jack spoke hoarsely. "You don't think she has... lost faith in me? With everything to do with Daniella and the Marchioness?"

"The Marchioness has caused Verity great pain." Christian sat back with a sigh. "And yes, I think Verity is struggling to hold onto the truth of the situation. She has been treated ... abominably."

Jack frowned. "What do you mean?"

Christian told him. Jack couldn't believe what he was hearing. The suggestion that Verity's paternity was being questioned did nothing to deter his feelings, instead it was filling him with an overwhelming

need to protect her.

“That woman!” Jack swore, jumping to his feet and beginning to pace. “She doesn’t warrant the title of ‘Marchioness,’ how can she treat Verity so? I won’t stand for it! No more! I’m going over there now.”

“Wait,” Christian stood, grabbing his brother’s shoulders. “There is more, I am afraid to say.”

“What?”

“Verity has decided to leave London. To avoid the scandal. She’s going to Devon.”

Jack’s heart filled with ice. “When?”

“Today.”

Jack had crossed to the door before he knew it, urgency burning through his blood. “Not without me, she isn’t,” Jack threw open the door.

“Jack, wait!”

Jack turned just in time to catch a small box thrown to him by Christian. His brother smiled at him affectionately.

“You’ll be needing that.” Christian raised his cup of tea in salute. “Go and fetch your future wife.”

Chapter Eighteen

Verity stared at her packed cases in her rooms, amazed that her whole life could be reduced to these boxes. Her rooms looked so bare without her usual accoutrements of life, her jewellery no longer splashed across her vanity, her gowns no longer hung like a chiffon rainbow in her wardrobe, her silver-framed portraits of her parents already tucked away in her luggage. She noticed the places on the bedposts where Trudy had chipped her height into the wood varnish as she had grown. She recognised the tiny doodles at the bottom of the wallpaper beside her bed where she had been bored as a child and scribbled away. All that was left were the memories now.

She sighed and looked at herself in the mirror one last time. She had changed into her travelling clothes as soon as she got home, switching out the lace, pink dress for a less assuming, but still pretty, pale blue gown with a matching jacket and bonnet, decorated with a sprig of silk daisies. She held it in her hands, turning it slowly as she examined her reflection. She briefly touched her mother's pearls, still sat regally against her skin. She knew it was a little ostentatious to wear them whilst travelling, but she would have to travel coach part of the journey and she was too afraid to pack them in her luggage. A knock on the door pulled her out of her reverie.

"Yes?"

"Mistress, your coach is here." Trudy's sad voice sounded on the other side of the door. "And Lady Law would like to speak with you."

"Bring the bags down, Trudy." Verity opened the door. "I shall go and see what she needs."

Holding her back erect and walking slowly, Verity crossed to Daniella's large guest suite. She could not imagine what Martina's

daughter could want with her. Surely the fact that she was beating a hasty retreat out of London and leaving her stepmother with a cold, handwritten note to contact her lawyers was reason enough for Daniella to stay far away from Verity. She had heard nothing from Martina since she had arranged for the missive to be delivered via one of the servants when she returned from Gladstone Manor. She had waited with bated breath for Martina's outrage, but had been met only with stony silence. Perhaps Martina was happy. Perhaps she now had everything she wanted: Jack for Daniella, and Verity gone. She steeled herself before carefully pushing open her stepsister's door.

"Lady Law?"

"Verity, come in."

Daniella stood by the windows of the light, pleasant room, her cream and gold dress matching the wallpaper beautifully. She looked so lovely, her bright red hair streaming in elegant curls over her shoulders, that Verity suddenly didn't begrudge her the happiness she had inevitably found with Jack. Such a woman would surely make any man happy. Daniella frowned as she took in Verity's travelling clothes.

"You are going out?"

"Yes, I am leaving."

"Leaving? For how long?"

"Indefinitely." Verity frowned. "Surely your mother told you? I gave her my letter this morning."

"This morning?" Daniella twiddled her fingers. "What - what did it say?"

"Well, that I refuse to be bullied into marriage and if she wants to expose my paternity then she will be met with my lawyers, and she can contact me at the late Marchioness' estate in Devon." Verity looked at Daniella carefully. She seemed surprisingly nervous at this news. "Did she not tell you?"

"She did not." Daniella looked away from Verity, gazing out of the tall windows. "Did you love your mother, Verity?"

“What an odd question.” Verity clenched her hands on her bonnet ribbons, her anger flaring. “Yes, I did, Lady Law. Very much. No matter what *your* mother says about her, I will always love her.”

“Oh, I didn't mean to imply!” Daniella stepped forward earnestly. “That is not what I meant!”

“Then what did you mean?” Verity snapped, her impatience showing. Daniella already had the thing she cherished most in the world, Jack's love. Verity wasn't inclined to give her more of her time.

“I only meant that you are lucky,” Daniella sighed, “to have had a mother who loves you.”

Verity snorted derisively. “Your mother loves you! No one who has seen her dote on you would think otherwise.”

“My mother loves my title,” Daniella corrected, and Verity raised her eyebrows in surprise. “She loved my father's title. I do not think she loved either of us truly. I think a mother who loves you does not force you into a wedding.”

“Oh?”

Verity hesitated, unsure how to proceed. She had never considered the possibility that Daniella was unhappy, or that Martina's affections were conditional. She felt a twinge of pity for her stepsister. Verity waited for Daniella to speak but she didn't, she simply stood, gazing out of the window as if waiting for something, and biting her bottom lip. Then Daniella seemed to come to a decision about something because she squared her shoulders and turned to Verity.

“My mother did not receive your letter, Verity, because she has been asleep for several hours now.”

“Oh.” It was no harm, Verity thought, if she was gone before Martina read it. It might be better, in fact.

“She is asleep because I gave her sleeping pills.” Daniella carried on as if Verity hadn't spoken. “So that she would be incapacitated whilst I explained to you and also ... whilst I called for the constable.”

"The constable?" Verity stared at Daniella. "Why?"

"Because of these." Daniella lifted up a sheaf of letters. Verity recognised them instantly. They were the letters Martina had held over her head since her father's funeral: the letters between her mother and her supposed lover.

"The letters." Verity swallowed hard. "Have you - have you read them?"

"I do not need to." Daniella folded them carefully and laid them on the table. "I believe they are forgeries."

"Forgeries?"

"Yes," Daniella nodded seriously. "I know my mother's hand and I recognize elements of it here. I believe she has forged these documents in order to perpetuate a fraud against you, and against the Huxley estate. The constable believes I am right, as do my lawyers. I believe she will be arrested."

"Are you in earnest?" Verity whispered. "And - and you would do this... to your mother?"

"Yes," Daniella nodded sadly. "Because she needed to be stopped and I was the only one who could do it."

"Daniella, I don't know what to say!"

Verity felt her soul lifted out of its melancholia. If it was true, if Daniella could prove that the letters were false, then all her troubles would be over! Then she thought of Jack and her heart dropped. No, they wouldn't be. Daniella would still be engaged to the man she loved. She felt her elation ebbing away and took a step back.

"Thank you," she said, in an even, formal tone. "I am most grateful. I bid you a good day."

"You still intend to leave?"

Verity glanced back over her shoulder at Daniella's troubled face. The woman could not possibly understand that the real reason driving her

out of London was not fear for her reputation, but the pain of seeing Daniella marry Jack.

"I have other reasons to leave London," she answered quietly. "Personal reasons."

Daniella stared at her for a moment, her head cocked to one side in curiosity, then it was as if a light dawned in her eyes. "Oh, you speak of the Duke of Sussex!"

Verity's heart constricted so tightly she almost put her hand to her chest to rub the spot of skin above it and ease the ache. She bit down on her lip instead.

"Please," she hated that her voice shook so tremulously, but she could barely control it. "Please, do not speak of your match with the Duke with me. I beg of you."

"But we are not matched!"

"I beg your pardon?" Verity stared at her stepsister, wondering if this was a cruel joke. "But I saw you walk in the gardens at the ball. I saw the way he looked so flushed and - and guilty! I heard what your mother said about him, he must marry you or his reputation would be ruined!"

"Well, where to start?" Daniella puffed out her cheeks at Verity's gush of words. "Yes, we did walk in the gardens together but only because we were forced to by Mama, and if he looked guilty to you it must only have been because he felt guilty, being seen with me when his heart belonged with you." Verity blushed at these particular words. "As for what Mama said, it was all lies, and I would never go along with it. That's partly why I had to do this to her. For me."

"For you?" Verity whispered.

Daniella nodded, her eyes full of sudden tears. "Last night I saw my mother truly, and I knew that she would never let me be free, as I want to be free. She would always be steering my life. The truth is I do not want to marry the Duke of Sussex or anybody else for that matter, but she would never just let me be." Daniella wiped her eyes. "So, I locked her in her bed-chamber."

“You - you locked her in?”

Daniella nodded, shamefaced. “I had to, Verity. What she was doing to you - it - it was so awful!”

“Oh, Daniella!” Verity threw her arms around her stepsister, hugging her close, overwhelmed with the rising happiness that had crept into her heart. “I am so sorry she hurt you!”

“Thank you, I am sorry for you too. I hope you can forgive me.”

Verity felt Daniella’s soft arms wrap tightly around her and took a moment to breathe in her particular scent. Lavender and geranium: expensive perfume. Perhaps, Verity thought fleetingly, this is what it felt like to have a sister.

“Of course I can.”

Perhaps both she and Daniella could find their way through the dark spell Martina had cast and take solace from one another.

“Verity!”

The two women jumped apart at the sound of a loud, male shout echoing up the stairs.

“Is it the constable?” Daniella crossed to the window, glancing out. “No, I don’t see the police carriage. Who might it be?”

Verity thought she knew and rushed to the door, flinging it open and running to the top of the stairs where she stopped short, with a gasp. Jack stood at the bottom of the staircase, his face flushed, and a bunch of flowers clasped in his hands.

“You’re leaving?” he demanded. “For Devon?”

“I am,” Verity answered, faintly.

“Without saying goodbye?”

Jack glared at her in such a way that despite the weakness she felt in her knees, her desperation to be in his arms, Verity felt her own

hackles rising. If he was not engaged to Daniella, why had he waited so long to come for her?

“Goodbye.” She crossed her arms angrily. “Is that all?”

“I brought you something,” He extended the flowers to her. Verity didn’t move. She felt a bubbling fury at him. How dare he try to give her flowers after he had sent Daniella flowers? Even if there had been nothing between them as Daniella said, it only made her think of the many other women he must have sent bouquets to in his lifetime.

“Thank you.” She nodded to a lingering servant to take them, who set them in an empty vase by the open front door. Jack’s eyes lingered on them.

“Will you not look at them?”

“I don’t need flowers,” Verity walked down the steps buttoning her jacket. “Did you need anything else?”

“Yes, where is your stepmother?” He glared around. “I have a few parting words for her before we leave.”

“Daniella locked her in the bed-chamber. Wait a minute.” Verity held up a hand, stopping halfway down the sweeping stairs. “Before we leave?”

“Why would Daniella lock her in the bed-chamber?”

“Because it turns out she may have forged documents in order to blackmail me.” Verity’s mind was moving so fast she didn’t have the capacity to lie or sugar-coat things. “What do you mean, before we leave?”

“I could have told you that,” Jack scoffed, “As if your father would ever betray your mother! I never heard so much nonsense!”

“Jack!” she exclaimed, running down the rest of the stairs and, without thinking, clapping a hand over his mouth. “Please, keep your voice down! The servants!”

He stared at her, dark stormy eyes alive with mischief and passion.

Verity realised that she was not yet wearing her travelling gloves, and her bare palm, the naked skin of it was flat against Jack's soft lips. She swallowed hard, and slowly removed her hand. Jack looked her over, his eyes burning coals that seemed to scorch every place their gaze rested.

"You look beautiful." He caught her hand in his, his grip tight. "So why is that harpy of a woman locked in the bedroom?"

"Because Daniella called the constable." She tried to pull her hand away. "What did you mean, before *we* leave?"

"Before we go to Devon. If that's where you want to go." He squeezed her hand distractingly, his bare hand so warm and strong against hers. "We might have to wait and deal with this constable business first."

"It's not - I don't -," Verity couldn't think when he was touching her like this, his thumb making small circles on the back of her hand, reminding her so intensely of how it felt to have those thumbs trailing across her jawline and neck.

"I am going to Devon, and you are not coming!"

She pulled her hand away and strode to the main door, where outside her coach was being loaded. As she reached the door a second coach arrived, the constable and his men in their blue uniforms quickly dismounting and crunching over the gravel and up the stone steps.

"We are here for Lady Martina Law-Huxley, Marchioness Huxley?" The constable began, addressing himself to Verity.

"Yes, uh - um," Verity stuttered.

"Upstairs in the locked bedroom, Gentlemen," Jack spoke cheerily, appearing beside Verity. "We're unfortunately about to leave but I'm sure the Lady Law will be able to assist you."

He pointed to the top of the staircase where Daniella stood, looking at Jack and Verity in a nonplussed way. The policemen filed into the house and Verity, barely waiting for them to pass, rounded on Jack with a ferocious glare. His suave, man of the world attitude was driving her insane! Did he think he could just waltz back into her life as if he hadn't abandoned her at the ball?

"You are not coming with me!" she snapped.

"Well, I'm hardly going to let my future wife go to Devon on her own!" Jack snapped back.

"Future wife?" Verity laughed, setting her bonnet on her head angrily, trying to disguise the way her hands shook with fury and excitement. "It's the first I'm hearing of it! Give that back!"

Jack had grabbed her bonnet from her head, just as he had done when they were children together in a classic ploy for attention. He held it behind his back with a mischievous grin that made her want to either kiss him or kill him.

"No, if I can't go then you can't go."

"Don't behave like a child!" Verity shouted, stamping her foot like one. "You had your chance and you didn't take it! I am not your plaything, Jack Gladstone! I - I can't bear to -,"

Verity stopped speaking, biting down on her lip so hard she tasted blood. Jack looked at her quietly.

"Can't bear what?" he asked, softly.

"I can't bear to be toyed with, Jack." She closed her eyes tightly. "I've been through hell, and you had a chance, you had a chance to take me away from it and you - you didn't ask me."

"I was a fool not to ask you then," Jack spoke huskily. "I know I was, but anything you think is happening between myself and Lady Law is all gossip, more of your stepmother's dirty work, I am afraid to say. I - I let myself be manipulated by her and for that, I can never be more sorry."

"Well, you are not alone in that," Verity conceded wryly, opening her eyes and sighing. "For that you are forgiven."

"Forgiven?"

"Yes." She held out her hand, trying not to let it tremble. "So, give me back my bonnet."

“I would rather give you this.”

Jack reached behind him to the small table, gently lifting the bouquet Verity had rejected and offered it to her again. Verity took a deep breath and took the flowers with shaking hands. They were the softest, loveliest roses in pink and yellow and complemented by golden sprigs of jasmine. They gave off the most heavenly scent. Verity was instantly transported back into the rose garden of her childhood where she had played with the Gladstone boys in those long, easy summers of friendship.

“They smell like you,” Jack spoke huskily. “Like home.”

“Oh, Jack,” she whispered, pressing her face into the blooms to inhale their scent.

“I have often thought of what flowers I might send you,” Jack spoke gently, his face softened by her delighted expression. “Needless to say, the flowers that were attributed to be mine could not have been further from a reflection of my heart.”

Jack’s fingers reached and touched the string of pearls at Verity’s neck that covered the still pink, inflamed skin there. Verity felt her heart skip several beats at the pressure of his touch. He frowned as his fingertips brushed the reminder of the chrysanthemums.

“I would never send flowers that might hurt you, in fact, wherever I have lived, even abroad, I have forbidden them from my homes. I didn’t know why, really, it just became a habit, but now I know I was always making it possible for you to be there, because I wanted you there, Verity. In every grand house, in every city, in every room from Dover to Constantinople, I thought of you.”

Verity couldn’t speak. Her heart was full of the thought of him, so far away from her and yet always so near in her thoughts. She couldn’t have helped it, even if she had wanted to. She reached across the distance between them and kissed him. She caught him in a small moment of surprise, his lips open slightly, but they met her own lips and responded with a rush of warm breath and softness. Verity rocked back in surprise, Jack following her, dropping her bonnet and cupping the back of her head, tangling his fingers wonderfully in her curls and pulling her body against his.

"I love you," he gasped. "I love you completely, utterly, please -please say you love me too."

"I love you too," she whispered, pressing her cheek against his. "Thank you for my flowers."

Jack reached down to the bouquet, plucking a single pink rose and carefully pushing its dark thornless stem into her hair before tucking a golden curl behind her ear. She shivered, despite the June sunshine beating on the steps at Huxley Hall.

"When I smell roses and jasmine, I think of you, I think of Huxley and the time we had here. I - I also added a card."

"You did?"

He presented it to her with a flick of his fingers. It was the Queen of hearts. Verity's eyes were filled with tears of relief and wonder, her breath coming in gasps. She didn't need to ask what it meant.

"Truly?" she whispered.

Jack nodded. "Ever since we danced together when you were still a girl, perhaps before, but certainly since I returned to England, there has been no other woman I could call the queen of my heart. Will you -,"

He began to kneel, fumbling in his pocket as he held out a small ring box. Verity stared down in amazement as the only man she had ever loved lowered himself to one knee in a marriage proposal.

"Yes!" she blurted out, pressing her hands to her chest, dropping her flowers in her shock.

"I haven't asked you yet, darling," Jack smiled lopsidedly. "But thank you for your enthusiasm."

"Yes, I will marry you!" She pressed her hands against his face, kissing both cheeks, her lips burning against the delicious feel of the rough and smooth skin there. "If you will have me!"

"If I'll have you?"

“Will you?”

In a moment, Verity was swept off her feet as Jack swung her up into the air. She felt his arms holding her so tightly, saw the world tipping and swirling around her as she spun, her hair whipping around her face.

“Jack!” She laughed. “Put me down!”

He did so, smiling from ear to ear. “Yes,” he said, pressing his soft lips to hers. “I will have you, Verity. Nothing would make me happier.”

Verity let him kiss her, revelling in the feeling of his arms around her, protecting her from the world. *Let it be like this forever!* She wished fervently. She felt the wish echoed in her body, coursing through her veins, from the tips of her fingers as she clung to Jack to the edges of her eyelashes as they fluttered softly against his cheek. In every fibre of her being she was filled with the knowledge that Jack loved her, and she had never been so happy.

Chapter Nineteen

Jack's heart had never been so full as when Verity looked up at him with her emerald eyes. In a flash, he remembered receiving the news of his father's death in Rome. He recalled how comfortless, how lonely he had felt and how the memory of Verity, of her vitality and joy, had restored him. Even then, deep down, he had known he wanted to be her husband.

"You must permit me to finish proposing to you," he laughed. "Here."

With fumbling hands, Jack sprung open the ring box. Verity gasped at the beautiful emerald set in a gold, filigree band.

"Oh, Jack! It's beautiful!"

"I thought it would match your eyes," Jack slid the ring onto her finger, gently kissing her hand. The gem sparkled brightly in the afternoon sunshine, perfectly suited to her pale skin. "It does."

"I love it."

Verity looked up at him with glittering eyes, her perfect lips pink and plump from his furious kisses. It was all Jack could do not to pull her into his arms again, to kiss her and kiss her until the sunset.

"Well, I see everything has come out well!"

Jack jumped away from Verity at the sound of his mother's voice. He and Verity had not noticed the Gladstone carriage pulling up by the lake, and his mother and Christian making a slow stroll towards Huxley Hall.

"What are you doing here?" Jack demanded.

“I had a letter today from Daniella, informing me of her arrangement with the constable. I wanted to ensure Verity had proper legal protection.” Christian was smiling from ear to ear as he gazed at his friend. Jack could feel Verity bobbing up and down slightly with excitement as she waved her new engagement ring at Christian. It was so endearing that he could not even be irritated at his family for interrupting such an intimate moment.

“And mother?” Jack asked wryly. “Is she your latest legal consultant?”

“I came to see the future Duchess of Sussex!”

Jack watched in amazement as his mother climbed the steps, took Verity in her arms and kissed her firmly on both cheeks.

“You shall do very well, my dear!” she announced.

“Thank you, Duchess.” Verity looked at Jack with a flush of embarrassment and, he detected, a tiny bit of pride.

“Ah-ah!” His mother waved her finger. “You shall call me Mother now, I shall insist upon it.”

Verity’s flush deepened and Jack noticed the spring of tears at the corners of her eyes.

“Thank you,” Verity whispered. Jack squeezed her hand tightly, knowing she must be thinking of her parents.

“Let’s put these blooms in some water,” the Duchess tutted, “And what is Verity’s bonnet doing on the floor?”

Verity smiled shyly at Jack, clearly recalling the carefree way both of them had thrown themselves into each other's arms.

“I am sorry, I believe I dropped it.” Jack smiled at her slowly, enjoying the way he could make her blush.

“Excuse me, sir?”

The happy family turned. The constable stood in the doorway, a small notepad in his hand.

“Yes, constable?”

“We are going to be taking the Marchioness into custody,” the constable coughed. “She will be facing significant charges.”

“For forging documents?”

“Yes, it seems that the Marchioness has not been truthful about her... origins.” The constable blushed, unable to meet Verity’s eye. “She is, in fact, not the woman of moral upstanding she appears to be. For a while Scotland Yard has been pursuing a particular criminal network that focuses on forgeries - documentations, art, antiques and the like.”

“And you suppose she is working for them?” Christian asked.

“No sir,” The constable shook his head. “She is the network! By which I mean, she has been coordinating this criminal syndicate for a long time, nearly thirty years. It seems that she is something of a black widow, using her marriages to further fund her criminal exploits.”

“A black widow?” The Duchess looked sharply at the constable, then glanced at both of her sons. “I think you may need to expand for us there, constable.”

The constable nodded. “It might be better we step into the parlour.”

“Of course, please do,” Verity said.

As the lady of the house now that her stepmother was being held by the police, Verity led the way into the parlour, gesturing for the constable and her other guests to sit. Jack stood by her side and then, when she lowered herself onto the chaise, sat beside her and grasped her hand. Jack’s heart had fallen at the phrase “black widow.” He had a horrible feeling he knew what the constable might say next and was prepared to comfort Verity if she needed it. Verity was glancing towards the door with a frown.

“Where is Daniella? Does she need to hear this also?”

Jack noticed the way Verity used Daniella’s first name. Clearly, she had put aside the differences she and Martina’s daughter had faced and had decided to consider her a friend.

“We have already spoken with Lady Law,” the constable shifted uncomfortably. “She was ... distressed by the news we had to import. She elected to stay up in her rooms and not see her mother before departure.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I will check on Lady Law.” Christian rose and quickly left, the sharp crack of his polished shoes echoing from the marble hallway.

“What can have been so distressing?” Verity frowned. “She already suspected her mother was a forger. She had come to terms with it in order to take action against her.”

“My dear, do you understand the term, black widow?” Jack was grateful for his mother at that moment, as she leaned towards Verity with a kind expression. When Verity shook her head, the Duchess reached for Verity’s other hand, soft, youthful skin cradled inside his mother’s aged fingers.

“It is a term used to describe a woman who marries a man for financial gain.” The Duchess looked at Jack, pity in her features. Jack put his arm around Verity’s shoulder, anticipating the blow to come. “Before murdering him.”

Jack felt Verity stiffen under his grasp. He watched the pretty rosiness of her cheeks fade away to be replaced by the white blanching of shock.

“You - you think that Martina murdered my father?” Verity looked at the constable. “Is it true?”

The constable nodded, confirming Jack’s worst fears.

“The embalmer made a note for the coroner - it took a while to process, I am afraid, otherwise we could have had the remains examined before burial.” Verity flinched at these words, and Jack gripped her tighter, her new engagement ring trembling on her shaking hand and bouncing little prisms of green light around the room.

“He found a large amount of arsenic in the Marquess’ body. Incidentally, this was the same substance found in the autopsy of the late Lord Law.” The constable shook his head. “I am afraid to say that

both gentlemen fell victim to her charms.”

“Thank goodness their daughters did not!” The Duchess added, tartly.

“What will happen to her?” Verity whispered. “Martina?”

“She is protected by her title, still, I am afraid to say so a public trial is out of the question -,”

“That is perhaps for the best,” Jack interrupted. He couldn’t imagine what a public trial might do to Verity, how she might suffer to hear all the details of her father’s murder poured over by every gossip in London.

“She will be committed to an institution outside of London. She will not be permitted to re-enter society, especially without the support of her family. Her only daughter, the Lady Law, has expressed a desire to keep the Marchioness away from the public for the rest of her days. She believes her mother to be a danger to others, and I am inclined to agree.”

Jack thought this was perhaps an understatement when describing a double-murderess and catching his mother’s eye, he knew she agreed. But Verity’s thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. Her head was turned to look out of the parlour door, her body as still as a hunting cat. Then she sprung up, rushing towards the door. With a jolt of his heart, Jack saw that the other policemen were escorting Martina down the grand stairs.

“Verity!” he shouted, running after her. “Verity, don’t -,”

“You killed him,” Verity gasped, blocking her stepmother’s way.

Martina seemed smaller, somehow. Her hair was slightly dishevelled and her eyes unfocused, probably from the effects of the sleeping drugs Daniella had slipped to her. Between the two policemen with her hands in fetters, she looked older, the lines on her face more pronounced with the weariness of defeat. She stared at Verity as if she was a singer or piano player, a distracting entertainment rather than a woman for whom she had made life unbearable.

“You killed my father,” Verity repeated, her eyes hard as gemstones and two spots of bright red angry flush appearing high on her

cheekbones. “You killed him!”

The police looked at Jack warily, and Jack tried to reach for his true love’s hand.

“Verity, I don’t think this will help -,”

“Arsenic,” Martina spoke hoarsely, but Jack thought he saw a familiar, dreadful glitter of cunning in her eyes. “In his morning tea, every day, after he announced he would leave his estate entire to you. Couldn’t have that. Already fell for that once.”

Martina jerked her head behind her, and Jack saw Daniella standing at the top of the staircase, Christian’s arm protectively around her as if he were the only thing holding her up.

“Then a few tweaks to the will and a big dose.” Martina made a gurgling sound at the back of her throat. It was an ugly sound and made Jack’s hair stand on end. “All done. Arsenic. Very effective.” Martina leaned close and whispered in a loud hiss. “I watched!”

Verity raised her hand and Jack was sure she was going to strike Martina. He could see in Martina’s eyes how much she desired to have bettered Verity’s good temper and patience, and he wouldn’t permit it. He quickly stepped between them, cradling Verity’s hand in his own, pulling her attention onto him.

“She is not worthy of your censure or your notice,” he murmured. “Do not let her take any more time from you or give her the satisfaction.”

Verity’s face crumpled. She threw her arms around Jack’s waist, holding on for dear life.

“Shhh, it’s alright now,” he whispered into her forehead, jerking his own head towards the police who bundled Martina out of the doors. “You never have to see her again.”

“Please, Jack, I need some air.” Verity gasped, her forehead pressed into his chest. Before Jack could answer, Verity had slumped against him, clearly overwhelmed by the emotion of the incident she had fallen into a faint. Jack sprung into action, sweeping Verity’s collapsed form into his arms.

“Oh goodness!” The Duchess exclaimed. “Take her upstairs, Jack, I will take care of all of this.”

Jack happily obeyed, carrying Verity upstairs feeling a strange combination of worry and arousal. Her body was so close to his, so warm and tender. Her maid, Trudy, ran ahead of him and opened the door. Verity’s room was sparse, all her belongings in cases currently sitting on the drive beside the waiting carriage. Jack carefully lowered Verity onto the embroidered quilt, brushing the tendrils of strawberry blonde hair away from her forehead.

“Verity?” he murmured, stroking her face.

She stirred, eyes slowly blinking, and Jack’s heart relaxed with relief. She was well.

“Let me tend her, sir.” Trudy hovered over his shoulder, holding a bowl of water and a cloth.

“No,” Jack squeezed Verity’s hand. “No, I won’t leave her. Please,” he nodded for Trudy to set the bowl on the nightstand. “I will take care of her. Go and check on Lady Law. She was very distressed. She might like some tea.”

“Very well. I shall bring my Mistress a cup also.” Trudy responded, a little stiffly, before leaving with a slight frown on her face.

Jack knew it wasn’t entirely proper for them to be left alone like this, even if they were engaged, but he needed Verity to himself. Tenderly, he squeezed the damp cloth and pressed it against her face. Her green eyes fluttered open.

“Jack.” She took some deep breaths. “What happened?”

“You swooned downstairs. I imagine it was the strain of it all, no, don’t try to get up,” he pressed Verity’s shoulders back against the pillow. “You need to rest.”

Verity sighed, letting her head fall against the pillow. Jack couldn’t help but imagine how she might look with her hair all undone, lying in the bed. He swallowed hard, hoping his face didn’t betray his desire.

“She’s really gone?” Verity asked softly.

Jack nodded. “She can never harm you or Daniella or any of us again.”

“And my father,” Verity’s eyes filled with tears again. “His death finally makes sense. His long illness, his suffering ... at least now,” Verity’s eyes blazed with sudden anger, “He has justice.”

“He does. So, do you.”

Verity smiled at him, her eyes drifting closed as he gently wiped the cool cloth across her jaw.

“Mmmm, that feels wonderful.”

“Does it?” Jack’s voice was rough, his hand a vice grip on the flannel as he fought his urge to follow its movement with a rain of kisses.

Then Verity uttered a soft moan that sent an electric thrill through his body. Before he could withdraw, afraid of his own reaction, she lifted her neck towards his hand, encouraging the gentle progress of the cloth lower, across the creamy skin under her collarbone. Jack fixed his eyes on the hollow of her throat mechanically, determined not to look at the perfect swell of her breasts rising and falling against the lace, scalloped neckline of her gown.

“I am too warm,” Verity moaned, raising herself up on her elbows.

Jack looked at her, noticing the flush around her ears and cheeks. With trembling hands, still evidently weak from her faint, Verity tried to pluck at the buttons of her travelling coat.

“Allow me.”

Jack held his breath as his fingers reached for the dainty, satin buttons that closed the short jacket over Verity’s breasts. He tried to remind himself that he was not undressing his fiancée, not really, he was merely helping her be more comfortable. It would do her no good to overheat and faint once again. What he was doing was medicinal, if anything, but his mind soon lost all sense of propriety when confronted with the physical perfection of her body. The travelling

jacket was snug, and when the last button was released so was Verity, her breasts softening out inside the loose, blue fabric of her travelling dress as if exhaling gently after the restrictions.

Jack felt their warm buoyancy brush against his hands as he gently eased the jacket over Verity's shoulders, watching the reveal the open neckline and soft, flimsy fabric of her dress sleeves that had pushed down inside the jacket's constriction and left Verity's right shoulder miraculously bare. Jack stared at this astonishing patch of naked skin. He couldn't help himself. He dropped the jacket on the floor beside the bed and raised shaking fingers to trace the soft line of her shoulder.

"Jack -," Verity spoke breathlessly, "Please."

"Of course, my love," Jack gently tugged the fabric of her sleeve back into place. *Control yourself, Gladstone!* He remonstrated himself sternly. "Forgive me."

"No, that's not what I meant." Verity's eyes were bright and glittering, her chest flushed.

"Please ... kiss me."

Verity's eyes lowered, turning her head towards her shoulder. Jack watched, his breath caught somewhere between lungs and throat, as she raised a fragile finger and pushed that flimsy sleeve back down her arm. She looked up at him, her cheeks aflame.

"Please kiss me... *there*."

Jack thought his heart may have stopped. She wanted him! He realised, his heart bursting with happiness, but it was the last rational thought he could contain. Desire was rising in him like a red cloud and leaning forward, so slowly, as if to prove to himself that he could resist her if he really had to, he pressed his lips against the soft curve of her shoulder where the fabric had sat so daintily. He might have been able to pull away, he might have had the self-control to simply kiss her in this secret, forbidden place and remove himself, if Verity hadn't gasped.

It was such a delightful sound; a pure noise of desire and he felt his own body responding like an animal. He moved his lips along her

collarbone, kissing again and again with featherlight pressure and felt her body arching towards his, one of her small, ladylike hands cupping the back of his head and twisting his hair in her fingers. He groaned against her skin and, like a blind man, rose to find her lips, tasting her as if she were the only thing he needed to survive.

Her response was more than he could have dreamed. She wrapped her hands around the back of his head and pulled him towards her with surprising ferocity so that Jack was forced to place both hands on either side of her face, pressed into the feather pillow. She continued to arch her back and Jack was driven wild by the sensation of her soft body moving against his chest. God, how he wanted her, more than life, more than anything. It was taking everything he had not to raise himself fully above her, slide a leg between hers and push the length of himself against her warm, supple body. He gripped the pillow in his fists as Verity's kisses moved to his jaw, to the soft skin at the side of his neck. He was determined not to put his hands on her, but God, how he wanted to! To feel the fullness of her breasts in his hand, to stroke the soft curve of her waist and the hard ridge of her hip bone.

There was a loud rap at the door and Jack wrenched himself away.

"Who is it?" He called, his throat dry and voice harsh.

"I've got some tea for my Mistress." Trudy's voice called through the door.

"Of course," Jack spoke loudly, rising quickly from the bed and trying to flatten his hair whilst Verity reached for a modest shawl to drape over her bare shoulders and tucked her wayward curls back into place.

"Do come in!"

Trudy did so, setting the tea beside her mistress, gently inquiring about her health and Verity answering demurely, her eyes downcast in the perfect vision of a sweet invalid, as if the passionate woman he had felt in his arms not moments before was simply a fevered dream. Jack took the teacup Trudy offered him, forcing his hands not to shake and did not speak. He couldn't help praying that Trudy would leave and he could surrender himself to his desire. Staring blankly at the wallpaper, he fought for self-control, slowly regaining it with measured breaths and long sips of tea. Only when Trudy was sure her

Mistress was well and appropriately replenished with tea and a nibble of biscuit, did she finally leave them alone.

“Will you not sit back down with me?” Verity set her tea aside and patted the spot on the bed where Jack had previously sat. He shook his head ruefully.

“Better not. I was very much in danger of getting carried away.”

“I suppose that wouldn’t do,” Verity smiled. “Not with a soon to be married woman.”

“Indeed.” Jack sipped his tea, enjoying this flirtatious side of Verity. “How do you feel?”

“In truth, I confess myself weary,” she stifled a small yawn with a smile. “It has been ... quite a day.”

“Would you like to sleep?”

“I think I should, especially if I am to go back down and face questions and wedding plans from your mother and Daniella,” she joked.

“That will require more strength than the two of us combined!” Jack laughed and set his own cup down. “I shall leave you to rest, my dear.”

He leaned over to kiss her forehead, but Verity lifted her lips to meet his, her hand snaking up to clutch his jacket lapels.

“Verity,” he muttered against her lips, fighting the rising burn of need inside himself. “We must be sensible.”

“Will you not just sit beside me whilst I sleep? I should like -,” Verity flushed deeply, “I should like to lay my head on your shoulder. I shall promise not to kiss you,” she added, gazing up at him with wide, innocent eyes.

“Temptress,” he growled, kissing her nose and making her giggle, but he obeyed.

Shuffling over to give him more room, Verity patted the spot on the bed. Jack sat down, leaning his head against the wooden headboard and his back against the pillows. He tapped his shoulder, wiggling his eyebrows invitingly, but instead Verity moved closer, shifting her body under his shoulder and laying her head on his chest with a sigh. Automatically, Jack lifted his fingers to stroke her hair and kissed the top of her head. It might have been indecent for the two of them to lay this way, entwined and sleepy, but Jack didn't care. It felt as familiar to him as breathing, as comfortable as his own skin.

"I could get used to this, *my Lord Duke*," Verity whispered, and Jack felt her smile against his ribs as she used the silly pet name from childhood.

"As could I, *my Lady Duchess*," Jack whispered back, twisting a finger inside one of Verity's shining golden curls.

It was not really true, Jack realised. He was already used to it, so used to it that giving it up would be unthinkable. He felt Verity laugh softly, her breath evening out as she began to edge towards sleep, her warm body releasing its tension and pressing heavily and pleasantly against his own.

"Soon, we will be husband and wife," she mumbled endearingly, her little hand opening its clenched palm to lay softly over his heart. "And you will be all mine, dear Duke."

Jack smiled and kissed her cheek, wondrously smooth and pink. He did not know if happiness could be complete, but in that moment, he certainly felt it was possible.

"I already am."

THE END.

Epilogue

“*D*id you have a good day, dear wife?”

Jack and Verity sat under the rose arbour at Gladstone Manor, waiting for the sunrise. Half-empty crystal glasses of champagne sat on the gravel beside them, and several candles in small clay pots held a little illumination for the couple. Servants watched from the faraway windows of the grand house, only able to see the dark figures of their master, his new wife and the pinpricks of golden light that surrounded them. They were lone silhouettes against the encroaching dawn - the darkness of the night giving way to a soft and damp grey and blue mist that rolled over the skyline, wrapping and encasing the newlyweds in their own bubble of quiet and stillness. The sun had not yet risen to pierce it, and they sat in the magical silver hour before the world was waking.

“I had a perfect day, dear husband,” Verity whispered, tugging a wool blanket a little tighter around her shoulders.

Their wedding had been the event of the summer. Eager to be wed, Jack had brooked no opposition in arranging their wedding for the last week of August, despite Verity’s concerns that too swift a wedding would arouse scandal. Jack had pointed out that since the meteoric decline of the disgraced Marchioness, their families were already ensconced in a scandal. So they may as well marry so Verity did not have to live in Huxley House alone with all the bad memories. They had been wed at the Gladstone family church on the estate and then held the most fabulous wedding ball. Now every bedroom at the local inns, manor houses and every single guest room in Gladstone Manor itself were filled with their happy, tired, slumbering guests.

“Did you notice how Shona seemed to glow?” Verity smiled. “I think she and Lord Addington may have an announcement to make soon.”

“Did you notice that Christian danced three dances with Daniella?” Jack countered, nudging his new wife playfully. “Three counts as a proposal, doesn’t it? You’re his best friend, has he not confessed anything to you?”

“Not a word.”

Verity smiled to remember the contented look on her dear friend's face as he moved through many dances with her beautiful stepsister. Daniella had been very anxious not to draw attention away from Verity and had spent many hours discussing her gown option with the future Duchess before finally settling on a demure, sapphire gown that matched her eyes. It had warmed Verity’s heart to see Daniella so light-hearted and open. Being relieved from the burden and pressure of Martina’s expectations had only made her more beautiful.

“She was the belle of the ball,” Verity added.

“No, my dear,” Jack pressed a kiss to her cheek. “No one was more beautiful than you. I - I have never -,” Jack swallowed hard, shaking his head.

“Yes?” Verity teased, running her fingers through his dark, unruly curls. Jack captured her hand and pressed it to his lips, sending a shiver of pleasure through Verity’s body.

“I have never seen a woman as beautiful as you,” he answered, earnestly.

“Thank you.” Verity automatically smoothed the fabric of her skirt. She still wore her wedding gown; a splendid ivory organza and silk affair, decorated along the sleeves and hem with embroidered and lace pink roses, to honour the manner of their engagement. Her wedding shoes were scuffed and dirty from too many dances at their wedding ball, and her hair was begging to fall out of its pearl and ivory pins, the pink roses that had been woven into it drooping and falling after the long day and even longer night of festivities. She reached up to dislodge them. “Can you help me?” Verity murmured.

“Of course.” Jack leaned close to her. He looked wonderful, and Verity felt the stirrings of passion tightening in her stomach. He had thrown his jacket over the back of the bench and sat only in his shirt, loosened at the collar so Verity could see the sharp triangle of tanned

skin at the base of his throat. How dearly she wanted to kiss him there.

“Your hair is stunning,” Jack’s voice was close to her ear as his fingers gently removed her pins, allowing her long, shimmering curls to tumble down. “How I have longed to run my fingers through it.”

He did, twisting his fingers into her locks, admiring the way the golden-red tresses shone around her face and unfurled down over her lovely bosom. Verity sighed heavily, closing her eyes. Her breath came in ragged gasps as she felt the warm breath of her husband against her neck, his hot and gentle kisses rasping against her jaw, against her throat, his curious fingers parting the wool blanket as his lips began to move lower.

“Jack,” she whispered, fixing her eyes on the obscured horizon, watching the mist begin to catch the gold and pink hues of the rising sun, cradling her husband’s curly head as he pressed his lips against the plush, rise of her breast above her bodice.

“Yes, my love?”

“Take me to bed.”

Jack lifted his head to hers, his face so close that she could see the dark blue and green flecks of his eyes that always reminded her of stormy skies. He kissed her with all the love he had stored up for a lifetime.

“Of course, dear wife.”

Verity did not think she could be more nervous as they moved, silent as ghosts, through the quiet house, the servants carefully lighting their way and then disappearing into the shadows. Then they entered Jack’s bedchamber. Her bedchamber now, Verity realised, with a jolt of recognition. Her toilette items had already been laid out on the vanity alongside Jack’s shaving brushes, her nightgown hung on the door of the closet in preparation for the evening. She would have to undress, she realised, and she had no idea how to do it in front of a man. Despite the warm embers still glowing in the grate, the room was still with the grey light of the pre-dawn morning. Verity shivered, pulling the wool blanket closer around her.

“Come, darling,” Jack spoke softly. “You cannot sleep in your wedding gown, as lovely as it is.”

“I - I have no one to help me with the buttons,” Verity swallowed hard.

“I am here,” Jack smiled, kissing her forehead reassuringly. “I can certainly handle a few buttons.”

“Well, it is... a little more than a few.”

Verity turned, removing the blanket and lifting her loose curls so Jack could see the line of tiny, bone buttons that processed down her back.

Jack groaned. “Lord help us!”

He dutifully set to work, unpicking each button with careful attention, his fingers warm and teasing.

“Have you done this many times, Jack?” she asked, slightly breathless at the feel of Jack’s warm, concentrated breath along her spine.

“Do you not think I would make faster progress if I had done so?”

Verity tried to laugh, but in fact Jack was making rapid progress and she was very aware that now he could see the clear curve of her body, accentuated by the tight stays and soon her shift, the flimsy undergarment under which she wore nothing.

“There we go.” Jack said triumphantly, and Verity felt the soft, slick movement of the heavy gown falling off her shoulders.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to face her husband. Her shift was of the finest, lightest cotton and she knew it left little to the imagination. Even the low light of the dying embers and the cold, misty glow from the window, Jack’s eyes fixated on the illuminated curve of her legs beneath the nearly transparent fabric. Her stays were white cotton too, and were laced particularly tight to give her that desired lifted bosom on her wedding day, but without the fine silk and lace to cover it, the area of her breasts were only draped in the paper thin cotton of the cup gussets, through which she knew her nipples would be visible. She felt them harden with an anticipatory chill as Jack’s dark, longing

gaze rested on her body in silent reverence. The silence was too much for her. Verity swallowed hard and tried her best at a show of bravado.

“Well?” She demanded, tilting her chin to stare into his eyes, making her golden curls drop gently behind her shoulders and down her back. “Shall I do?”

Jack stared at her for a long moment, so long that she almost lost her nerve, but then he dropped his hands to the hem of his shirt, tugging it out of the waistband of his breeches and lifting it over his head. Verity sucked in her breath. She saw first the skin above his waistband, surprisingly dark, like a chestnut and with a tangle of dark hairs that seemed to create a lazy trail from the taut dip of his belly button up the raised muscles of his stomach to his chest, where they spread, a sparse forest across his breastbone and surrounding his nipples. His arms, she saw, were muscled also, the skin lighter above the elbow and the veins underneath his arm running blue and clear against that fairer skin. The skin on his forearms were a deeper nutmeg, tanned from rolling his sleeves up for cricket, or work. She noticed a splash of reddish-brown freckles amongst the lighter hair of his forearms. She saw them even lighter still as they peppered across his collarbone. She felt the overwhelming urge to kiss each and every one.

“It depends,” Jack raised his eyebrows. “Shall I do?”

Verity kissed him in answer, holding his lips with hers and his face in her hands as he gently pulled her body free of her stays. The air was cool against the warm flesh under her breasts and she felt her skin puckering against it, her nipples hard and cold against the warm skin of his chest through her shift. Jack gasped and pulled away, looking at her with an intensity that made her knees weak. Verity felt her nerves returning. Jack was a man of the world and she was still an innocent young girl.

“Is it - is it complicated?” Verity swallowed hard. “How - how will I know what to do?”

“It is not complicated. As for knowing what to do -,”

Jack smiled and lowered his head to the opening of her shift, kissing her tenderly between her breasts. Verity arched her back to his lips

with a gasp, instinctively tangling her fingers in his hair, and loving the sound he made when she did. Jack looked up at her with a smouldering smile.

“You seem to know exactly how to bring me pleasure.”

His pleasure was evident as Verity’s leg brushed against his firm body.

“Well then,” she tried to keep her voice from shaking. “Let me continue to do so.”

Trembling, she lifted her shift over her head. Jack watched this slow, undressing with his lips slightly open, his hand beginning to shake as he clenched them into fists. Then the shift fell to the ground, leaving her naked in the dawn light apart from her mother’s lustrous pearls at her throat and the soft waves of her loose, reddish hair. Verity felt as if she were vibrating with energy, she didn’t know how long she could bear to be without his touch! When Jack pulled her to him, she answered his kisses with equal passion.

The feel of his harsh breeches against her bare skin, his strong hands gripping her hair, his teeth catching and tugging her lip, all of it was decadent and arousing for Verity who was lost in the tingling sensations of her new-found sensuality. He pulled her close as they fell back into the bed, his firm body pressed against her naked flesh.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered.

She did, allowing the darkness inside her eyes to heighten the feelings around her: Jack’s lips brushing her collar bone, nipping gently at her firm nipples, trailing down the hollow of her stomach to land featherlight kisses in places that had never been touched. She arched her back and gasped, her hand instinctively tangling in his dark hair as his tongue followed the path of his lips towards her core. She had never imagined such things or conceived of such pleasure.

“Jack,” she gasped, “I - I - want -,”

“It is alright, beloved.”

Jack’s voice was full of love and she opened her eyes. His eyes were dark and stormy, his cheeks were flushed, and his manhood stood prominently as he kneeled above her.

“Just tell me what you desire.”

“I don’t - I don’t know,” Verity stammered, her body trembling. “Just ... more.”

Jack swooped down to kiss her lips deeply, restlessly, and Verity felt his hands moving against her leg to untie his breeches. She gasped to feel the length of him, naked and warm, against her thigh but also felt herself tensing, anxious of the inevitable pain to come. Jack seemed to sense it and smiled down at her, kissing her forehead tenderly.

“Do not worry, my love, I shall know when you are ready. Take a deep breath.”

Jack’s quick fingers began exploring the dark cleft of her body, his kisses like butterflies’ wings against her shoulders and neck. She couldn’t help the soft, rhythmic moans that escaped her as she clutched the sheets in her tight fists as her body moved, seemingly without her approval, to follow the insistent journey of Jack’s fingers deeper into her body. The heat inside her began to spread, a burning, tickling insistence that she must go on, she must go on! She could barely catch her breath and started to pull away, panting hard, needing more, and Jack, a fire seemingly to light in his eyes, moved his body forward to glide in where his wicked, delightful fingers had just been. Verity gasped and turned her face away; her whole body as tense as a bowstring. Jack pressed her hips down into the mattress and kissed her deeply.

“Just wait,” he breathed. “A moment.”

They did, for one, heart stopping moment. Verity felt herself relaxing, starting to feel the tenderness of this wondrous thing, of Jack, her beloved, her husband, her soulmate, so deeply connected with her. With tender caution, Jack began to move his hips. Verity’s breathing deepened, and she felt her body answering, her own hips lifting to invite more closeness. There was a ball of pleasure inside her core, something so deep and precious it could not be named, and when Jack met it, tingling waves were sent throughout her body. She could not have stopped, even if she had wanted to, and she began to thrust against him with abandon, kissing, stroking, even gently biting his chest and shoulders as she did so.

“My God, Verity,” Jack moaned. “I love you!”

With a sudden shuddering he seemed to delve inside her, meeting that hot, vibrating point. Verity heard her husband cry out to God as if slain, but then, miraculously, he continued to push inside of her. The movement, so gentle and tantalising, seemed to start an explosion within her that pulsed throughout her whole body.

“Oh! Oh Jack!” Verity gasped, her body trembling like a leaf.

“Shh, my love, I am here.”

Jack kissed her deeply and held her through her release, stroking her body watching her in wonderment until they lay, naked and bound together, utterly spent. Slowly the rest of the world returned to Verity’s senses. The cold sweat seeped into the bedsheets, the raw scent of Jack’s naked flesh, the soft singing of dawn birds outside of the window. It seemed astonishing that the world could continue after such a moment.

“Try to sleep now, my love.” Jack’s voice whispered as he pulled the quilt up to cover both of them.

Verity burrowed her face into the crook of Jack’s neck sighing deeply.

“I love you, Jack Gladstone.”

“I love you too, Verity Gladstone.”

Her heart was full, and her mind was drifting. Her last thought before the gentle rest of sleep overtook her was how pleasant it was, to lie, safe and satisfied, in the arms of the man she loved.



Verity settled quickly into life at Gladstone Manor. Since the imprisonment of the Marchioness, all her father’s property had deferred to her and her new husband. Consequently, they took great joy in moving between both grand houses depending on need. Huxley Hall was a perfect country park, suitable for shooting in the summer and long evenings by the river and lakes away from the hot, heavy bustle of summertime London. Gladstone Manor was closer to the city, a convenient outpost from which to conduct business, socialising and shopping and an easy location from which to host guests and hold winter balls, since it was still much larger than Huxley Hall.

The Dowager Duchess was delighted to add Verity to their family life, and the two women took to spending their afternoons together when they could, in which the Dowager Duchess took it upon herself to help Verity learn and better understand the responsibilities of being married to the Duke of Sussex. It was easy for Verity to slip into calling her “mother,” for very soon she was one of her closest, and most maternal confidantes.

Christian enjoyed having his best friend so close to him, and they found more time for walking and reading in easy company. More and more, Daniella joined them for long stays at either of their estates, and Verity couldn’t help but notice that even when Daniella joined them at Huxley Hall during the summer and Christian was known to be busy at Gladstone Manor, he would inevitably appear on the doorstep with a myriad of excuses (the city was too hot, Mother was being too bothersome, he wished to see his best friend) which Verity always saw through immediately. The truth was Daniella and Christian were enjoying each other’s company. She and Jack often made a game of counting how many times in a month the pair would find some excuse to “accidentally” run into one another in their home.

No more than two months after their wedding, when the autumn evenings were drawing in and the leaves of the great woodland had turned shades of orange, red, and brown, Verity woke up feeling very strange. She had rushed to the basin in her dressing room, sure she was going to vomit, but had not. She had no appetite all day, no matter what delicacies the chef laid in front of her, except an unaccountable desire for devilled eggs that went on for days.

Then she started to feel nauseous in the evenings, a persistent, unavoidable feeling that followed whatever she ate or drank and whether she sat or stood. Every scent of the bedroom around her made her stomach roll. Then, as one evening drew to a close and Jack and Christian worked together in the study, her nausea reached its peak and she was sick, in her dressing room with Trudy in attendance.

“It’s all those eggs,” Trudy clucked, carefully wiping Verity’s mouth.

“It can’t be,” Verity closed her eyes wearily, feeling as if the whole world were turning.

“I have barely had any today. This sickness, Trudy, it won’t go away. It is bad when I wake but so much worse in the evenings, and - ,”

Verity lowered her voice, “- my whole body feels tender and - and oddly full, as if there is too much of me, though all I can bear to eat are devilled eggs and all of my favourite foods make me queasy just to think about. Even the smell of partridge -,” Verity felt a film of bile climbing at the back of her throat just to think of it. “- turns my stomach inside out. Something must be wrong with me!”

Verity opened her eyes to see Trudy standing above her, counting on her fingers. Then her face split into a wide smile and her eyes grew bright with joyful tears.

“Oh, Duchess, nothing is wrong!” she cried. “You have been missing your courses - you are with child!”

Verity gasped with delight, instinctively placing her hand on her lower abdomen, and the two women danced and shouted for joy. Verity immediately began thinking of how she would share the good news with her husband. She waited until the two of them were laid together in bed that evening, Jack’s hand lazily stroking her back and shoulder as they lay curled against one another in the darkness.

“Jack?” she whispered.

“Mmm-hmm?” Jack’s voice was sleepy, his warm breath close to her ear as he nestled his face against her soft curls.

“I have some news.” Verity paused. “I believe we shall have a new addition to the family.”

“Oh what, did Christian finally ask Daniella for her hand?” Jack snorted. “Hardly counts as news.”

“No, not that.”

Verity rolled over to face her husband, watching his dark eyes for his reaction. She took his hand in hers and moved the large, strong fingers to her abdomen.

“*This.*”

Jack seemed to go entirely rigid. His face was unreadable in the darkness and his breathing seemed to have stopped.

“You - you are -?”

He couldn't finish the sentence, but his fingers flexed instinctively against hers, already seeking to feel the gentle new curves of her body. Verity nodded, smiling at him softly.

“I think so.”

“Oh, my love.” Jack gently eased her onto her back, looking down on her with his dark fiery eyes, his face carved in concern, love, fear, and wonderment.

“Are you well?”

“Yes!” Verity laughed. “Well, no, not really. I've been feeling terribly sick and I've had no appetite except for -,”

“Devilled eggs, I had noticed.” Jack laughed. “Well, perhaps our child has a taste for paprika.”

“Our child,” Verity repeated, laying her palm against her husband's face. The words felt glorious to her, as if, for the first time since the passing of her mother all those years ago, a great cavern of dark grief was being slowly filled with a warm glow of light.

“I love you,” Jack whispered. He lowered his head to Verity's stomach, pressing his cheek against her nightdress as if listening for the small child growing there inside. “And I love you also,” he kissed her belly.

Verity didn't know if she had ever felt more complete or whole than at this moment, with her husband and child so close to her.

“We love you too.” Verity sighed.

The End?

Extended Epilogue

Eager to learn what the future holds for Verity and Jack?

Then you may enjoy this **extended epilogue**.

Simply [tap here](#) and you can read it for **FREE**, or use this **link**:

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Afterword

Thank you for reading my novel, **A Queen of Hearts for the Duke**. I really hope you enjoyed it! If you did, could you please be so kind to [write a review HERE](#)?

It is **very important for me to read your thoughts** about my book, in order to get better at writing.

Please use the link below:

<https://www.lisacampell.com/zxif>

Do you want more Romance?

Turn on the next page to read the first chapters of my previous best-selling novel: **Lady of Mischief**

This is the tale of Lavinia, a headstrong woman who must obey society's rules to please her family, and Colin, the tormented Marquess who is suffering by memories of his past. Brought together through the marriage of their parents, Colin and Lavinia must help each other navigate the dangerous waters of the ton, while hiding a bigger scandal. **Their forbidden desire for each other.**



Lady of Mischief



Chapter One

Lady Lavinia Crawford could not believe that her mother had such low opinions of her. She was seated on the blue armchair, her arms on each of the arm rests, her brows raised. Most times, staring at her mother was like staring in a mirror. They looked so much alike, they only took different actions and had differing opinions.

"I have had enough of all your nonsense, Lavinia. I shall have no more of seeing you in the stables with Ewan. He is to tame the horses and not you. From now on, you shall attend every ball that we get an invitation to. You must find a suitor as soon as possible."

Lavinia shook her head. Her eyes met squarely with her mother's. "Mother, there is absolutely nothing wrong with me helping Ewan tame the horses."

"You are a Lady!" the Duchess snapped. "And you shall act as such. You must cease to behave beneath your status, Lavinia. When will you grow up?"

"But I am already grown, Mother! And if these things that I do please me, then I see not why it should bother you, Mother."

The Duchess nodded towards her hair. "Such unruly hair. Did you have Rebecca brush it today?"

Lavinia touched her hair and was not surprised that it was all out of place, most of the pins Rebecca, her lady's maid, had put in, had fallen out. She tried to put the hair in place with her hands.

"How would you find a suitor if you behave in that manner? You have to behave right so you do not bring shame to us, Lavinia."

Of course, Lavinia thought, smiling. All her mother cared about was her reputation and she wanted to protect it at all cost, even at the cost of Lavinia's happiness.

"As always, Mother. You are more concerned about your reputation than my happiness."

She did not understand why her mere attachment to the horses in the stables bothered her mother.

The Duchess shook her head, and rose. "Lavinia. This is certainly not about the horses. Do you even understand anything that I have said at all?"

Lavinia rolled her eyes and snorted. Standing up, she made her way across the room and stared at the painting of her mother.

"Lavinia!" the Duchess snapped.

She turned.

The Duchess rubbed her temples and sighed. "Oh dear Lord." She looked up immediately and spoke. "This is not about the horses. This is about your behavior, Lavinia."

Lavinia narrowed her eyes. The Duchess ignored her and went on. "You slouch when you walk, Lavinia. You feed the horses and work in the stables. You speak as you please. You run in the field behind the estate! It is no way for a Lady to behave, Lavinia! This is not how I raised you! What has come over you?"

Lavinia swallowed. Her mother went on. "You walk barefoot in the field."

"So that I can feel the grass beneath my feet!" exclaimed Lavinia.

"You are a Lady, Lavinia," the Duchess snapped. "You do not even attend balls. How then do you think you will ever find a good match?"

"But mother...I do my charitable work, I am often at the orphanage —"

"Which is a good thing of course, but not so much that it gives you an

excuse to not attend a ball."

Lavinia groaned internally. She had a low opinion of balls. They were only filled with the members of society who only cared about propriety and who was not proper. It was full of gossip and whispers. She never wanted to be a part of that: a part of people who were untrue to themselves.

Lavinia shook her head. She could not believe that her mother had taken her away from the horses to reprimand her on how to live her own life. It was infuriating to say the least.

The door to the drawing opened very slowly, calling the attention of both mother and daughter. Charles Crawford, the Duke of Somerset, walked in. He took no notice of Lavinia, as his eyes were trained onto her mother instead, his wife.

"Darling Augusta," he said, and smiled.

The Duchess blushed and walked over to him. He kissed both her hands and held them, before looking up.

"Ah..." He grinned when he saw Lavinia. "John informed me that you have been here with Lavinia for the past hour. Is all well?"

Lavinia closed her eyes and held her breath. Surely her mother would not involve him in matters that were no concern of his. He was not her father, and so he needed not to know anything about their arguments.

"I was just explaining to Lavinia that she should start acting like a proper lady. She should focus on her improvement, so as to be able to find a suitor."

The Duke closed his eyes and nodded. "I agree, Augusta. I have wanted to speak to you about this, but I did not know how to approach the subject."

Lavinia stared at her mother in disbelief.

The Duke went on. "Lavinia needs to start acting responsibly and taking her life seriously. "

He walked around the Duchess to take a seat. "We must take this matter up or else she may never take it seriously."

"I am not your father, who might have endorsed your irresponsibility. Therefore, if you refuse to find a suitor by the end of the Season, I shall have no choice than to find a suitor for you, myself, and you must be wed to him. Further to this, I shall stop you from visiting that orphanage so often."

Lavinia was hurt that he could mention her late father in such a way. The Duke often did that, often reminded her that her father had committed so many wrongs, and as his offspring, she would never hear the last of it. It was as though he wanted her to know that he had saved her from the life her father had created for both herself and her mother, the fact that her mother had never asked him not to speak to her in such a way hurt her.

She did not want him to know that that had hurt her the most, so she shook her head. "You can't do that. You cannot force me to wed against my will...and you can't stop me from seeing the children."

"I am afraid he can, Lavinia. If you care about the orphanage, as much as you claim, then you must find a suitor," her mother said, moving to stand beside her husband.

Lavinia looked from her mother to the Duke and closed her eyes. She was deeply hurt. "But Mother —"

The door opened, and Mr. Spratt, their butler walked in.

He nodded in acknowledgement to everyone in the room.

Lavinia nodded in return.

He held out a stack of letters on a silver platter before the Duke and said, "Your letters, as requested, Your Grace."

When Spratt left, the Duke began to look through the stack, whilst the Duchess faced Lavinia.

"It is of no use for you to argue," she said.

"But Mother... the end of the Season is nigh." She raised her hands in the air. "If I do not continue to give to the orphanage, the children would starve."

"Then it is best you —"

"Colin is returning," the Duke interrupted, throwing the letter he had been reading down and taking off his spectacle. The Duchess took up the letter and began to read. Lavinia was frozen and silent.

Colin was coming home? She raised both her brows. It had been so long that she'd almost forgotten she had a stepbrother. Colin was the only child borne by The Duke of Somerset's first wife. Lavinia had known Colin for as long as she could recall. He had been such a shy lad. He was used to being on his own all the time, she had often had to seek him out, if he had wanted his company. She was certain he never liked it.

When he turned twenty-one, he had decided to explore the world. He had pleaded with his father for a long time, to let him go on the journey, but the Duke had not initially agreed with the idea. However, he conceded later on and gave Colin his blessings. One early morning in summer, he rode off in a carriage and his last gesture to his family, Lavinia and her mother included, was a nod.

"It is a good thing, I suppose. Colin can take her through all she needs to know about being a Lady. He can try to guide her, if she wants to find a suitor. Seeing as he is older and has seen the bigger world."

Lavinia could not believe her mother had said that. She shook her head. "Mother?"

The Duchess turned to her. "We shall have no further discussion on this, Lavinia. The decision is final."

Lavinia shook her head. Hurt and angry, she turned to walk out of the room, however, her eyes caught a note on the table, it topped the stack of letters. Scribbled in bold letters were the words:

"I KNOW WHAT YOU DID TO MR. FITZWILLIAM."

Lavinia froze for a second, while her heart beat frantically within her breast. She looked back at her stepfather, but saw him talking to her

mother, the both of them, laughing. The Duke placed the letter he had been holding over the note. He had not seen it yet. She swallowed hard. She wished he had seen it. She wanted to see his expression, to know how he would react to it. She looked up at him, and then back at the note peeking out.

"Lavinia?"

She flinched and looked up to see her mother looking at her. "Are you alright?"

Lavinia stared her mother in the eye. "Mo—"

"If this is another argument, then do not speak to me."

Lavinia huffed, and headed out of the drawing room. However, what she had seen still haunted her.

Chapter Two

When the carriage wheeled to a halt, Lord Colin Crawford, the Marquess of Grandview, looked out the window, his eyes trained on the large estate before him. He sighed. The estate was still as it had looked all those years ago. It was as though it had never aged. It had been five years since he left home and went on to explore the world. Now, he had had enough of the world and had felt like he wanted something new, something different. He thought that perhaps, returning home was what he needed.

"My Lord," the coachman said, pulling open the carriage door.

The double French doors of the house pulled open, and Spratt walked out, a small smile on his face. Mr. Phillip, or old Phil, his father's valet, walked out behind him. Old Phil had worked in the estate longer than Spratt. Behind him were two footmen, who rushed to bring his trunk inside.

"My Lord." Spratt bowed slightly.

Old Phil laughed and bowed as well. "It has been so long, My Lord."

Lord Grandview smiled. It indeed had. He nodded towards them and headed into the house. He looked around, feeling quite uncomfortable. He wondered if returning home had been the right choice to make. He wondered if by returning home, he could finally have a sense of belonging.

The paintings of his mother which had once graced the walls in the hallway were now taken down. All had been replaced by paintings of his father's new wife. He stopped walking. Was she being forgotten? So easily? He felt a strange shiver run through him. Perhaps, if he had never been born, she would still be here.

Of course. He had come home to not only his father, but his entire new family as well. They had been the reason he had left in the first place. He had begun to feel like he no longer belonged there. Even now, he still did not feel as though he did. Had he made a mistake coming home? Returning and hoping to finally be fulfilled. Had he made the right decision?

The clump of shoes down the hallway made him raise his head up. He looked up to see his father and the Duchess walking towards him. They were both smiling. The Duchess approached him first, she smiled warmly at him. He took her hand, bowing low over it, while she curtsied.

His father walked forward after the Duchess stood back. "Welcome back home, Colin." He hugged him.

It had been so long since he had seen his father, and yet it seemed that nothing had changed, they were as uncomfortable with each other as ever. He smiled. "Father."

"Your letter came from Scotland, just seven days ago."

His father led him into the drawing room. "Oh. I had left by then of course."

His father took a seat, the Duchess beside him, and Colin opposite. He wondered where the Duchess' daughter was. He remembered that she had been quite a lass before he left. She often bothered him, even when he had insisted on being left alone. The memory made him smile. He hadn't stayed for long after his father was wed. He left almost immediately. Lady Lavinia must be all grown now.

He was tempted to ask where she was, but he did not.

"How were your travels? France, to Scotland and even to Portugal?" the Duchess asked.

"My travels were fine, thank you," he said.

The Duke looked at his wife and took her hand in his. They looked at Colin. He felt unsettled by their gaze. Had something happened?

"Perhaps you would like to retire to your bed chamber and come

down when you are refreshed. You have only just returned from a long journey," the Duke suggested.

Colin nodded. His father was right. That was what he needed at the moment. Whatever they had to say to him, he preferred that they did so after he was refreshed. He needed a hot bath. With a nod, he turned and made his way upstairs to his bed chamber.



Colin came back down after he had a bath and had a bit of rest. His meal had been brought to his bed chamber in a hamper, courtesy of the Duchess. He was not certain how long he had been, but he didn't want to be holed up in his bed chamber any longer. He wanted to walk around the estate, see all the things he had missed. He wondered what more changes had been done to the house, aside from the taking down portraits of his mother. He made his way down the stairs, his hands clasped behind him.

As he walked down the hallway, the door to the drawing room opened, and his father emerged. The Duke froze when he saw him. "Colin. I am glad you are here."

"Is anything the matter?"

The Duke shook his head. "Nothing at all, but I do have something of great importance I would like to discuss with you, if you are not too fatigued?"

"I am not."

The Duke smiled. "Alright, come in."

Colin walked into the drawing room. The Duchess was seated, a book in her hand. One of his mother's books. The Duke joined her there, and Colin took a seat opposite them.

He nodded. "So..."

The Duke sat up, cleared his throat and spoke.

"Colin, we are well pleased that you have returned home, and there is

something that I shall request of you."

He nodded once, reluctantly, urging his father on.

"Lavinia, your stepsister. She is not quite what is expected of her as a Lady. As you are her elder and sophisticated, I would like for you to tutor her on mannerisms. How to act as a Lady suitable to be wed. I want her married off before the end of the season."

Colin could not believe what he was hearing. He had only just returned and his father was placing Lavinia as his responsibility. He stared at them, he had not been expecting any form of welcome, but he felt slighted that this responsibility that was being saddled on him almost immediately. He could not believe his ears.

The Duchess spoke up. "Lavinia just needs the right tutor, so she can learn to act like a proper lady. I suggested the idea to your father, and he thought it was perfect."

"You are the right person for this, Colin." His father continued.

His father was not even asking him if he would, he was assuming that he would. Colin was not sure what hurt him more. The fact that his absence for five years had not helped their relationship in the least, or the fact that his father did not seem to care for him and his plans, only what he could do for him.

He rubbed his eyes and sighed.

"That is not all," the Duke said.

Colin looked up.

"You should also start considering being wed. You have returned just at the right time. You need to start knowing the ways of the Duchy, preparing for responsibility, and that includes being wed, so that you may produce an heir."

Colin wished he had stayed in Scotland. His father was once again trying to push him too hard. Colin did not want to be wed to anyone that he didn't love. No matter how his father pressured him, he would never be wed to just anyone, he needed to be certain that she would

be the right person.

Seeing as he had no say in it all, according to his father, all Colin did was nod once. The Duchess smiled warmly, and his father nodded proudly. He stood up. "I will retire for the night."

He pulled open the door and was about to walk out when he was bumped into. When he looked up, he was stunned.

Standing before him was a Lady, in a grey dress, her blonde hair was packed roughly in a bun, the side of her face was smudged with dirt. Her hazel eyes stared back at him, her smile was apologetic.

"Pardon me, My Lord. I had been coming in, I hadn't even thought that perhaps you'd be on your way out as well. I had hoped to welcome you home properly..."

She was still talking, but he had lost the sound of her voice in his ears while he stared at her. Lady Lavinia. It had been so long. She had changed in the time that he was away. He could not help being stunned. She was all grown now, into a proper lady.

And she was *still* speaking, perhaps lost in her own thoughts and was saying them all out loud. The way her brows rose as she spoke, the way her hands moved in the air, the way her hazel eyes held apology, he was tempted to laugh. She was hilarious. It was perhaps a good thing that she had bumped into him and began speaking endlessly. He had been in a sour mood, but now, because he was amused by her, his spirits were lifted.

"Lavinia, be quiet," the Duchess said.

Lavinia was still looking at him, but she had stopped talking. Her eyes were wide. "Was I going on too much?"

He chuckled lowly, and nodded.

"Thank you, for the warm welcome, My Lady," he said kindly.

She smiled.

"Lavinia!" the Duchess snapped. "Where were you? I sent for you long

ago."

Colin had a feeling that if he left her alone with them, the wrath of their parents would be on her. She didn't look as though she needed his help in facing them, but somehow, he felt obliged to save her from them. He understood what it was like to be under the scrutinizing gaze of his father.

"I was busy, Mother."

"Doing what, exactly? And what is that on your face, Lavinia? Where were you?" The Duchess sat up now.

"I was in my bedchamber, Mother."

"Oh dear Lord." The Duchess rubbed her forehead. His father did the same.

Colin found it amusing, that Lavinia rattled them so much.

She looked at him, he looked away quickly and tried to hide his growing smile. He was reconsidering his sentiments about being her tutor. Perhaps it would not be so bad. Perhaps she would not trouble him so much.

Chapter Three

Lavinia had not expected Lord Grandview to be so grown now. She had almost not recognized him. His shoulders were broader, he seemed taller now, and his dark hair was longer than she had remembered. She must have embarrassed herself before him. He seemed startled by her. The way he had gazed at her. She must have scared him with all her talking.

"My Lady?" Rebecca called, signaling for her to take a seat on the small cushion stool before the mirror.

Lavinia did as asked. It was a new day, and she was supposed to be properly dressed for breakfast. She sighed.

Rebecca began to comb her hair, until it shone. Her mother had reprimanded her again, in the drawing room, after she had bumped into Colin. The Duke had told her that if she remained disobedient, he would reduce his support, he could cut her off financially.

"All done, My Lady," Rebecca said, as she tucked in the final pin.

Lavinia stared into the mirror. She looked proper, just like her mother would want. She stood up and smiled at Rebecca before making her way out of the bed chamber and heading down for breakfast.

Everyone was seated when she walked in, including Lord Grandview. She nearly groaned. She had wanted to arrive early.

"A Lady should arrive on time, Lavinia," the Duke said.

She said nothing in return, rather she took a seat by her mother and smiled at everyone. Her smile wavered when her eyes met with the Duke's. The words she had seen scribbled on the paper, filled her

mind. What had he done to Allen Bredon, Lord Fitzwilliam, her true father? And why?

She looked away quickly, she was certain that until she got answers regarding that note, her spirits would never be at rest.

They began their meal.

The Duchess spoke up, before they all rose at the end of service.

"Lord Grandview, you would begin the lessons with Lady Lavinia today?"

They all looked at him.

Lord Grandview nodded. "Of course, if Lady Lavinia is ready, that is."

"She is ready," the Duchess said.

Lavinia tried to stop herself from rolling her eyes. That would have been unladylike, and it certainly would not help her case.

"Splendid," Lord Grandview said.

"Of course, and dear," the Duchess turned to her. "I was thinking that it would be a good idea to throw a debut ball for you. It is high time we did."

Lavinia could only nod. She had avoided a debut ball for the past two years. She saw no need of being introduced to the ton. She hated the idea of a debut ball surrounded by gossips, and how they would come to look at her, and wonder why her debut was so late. She was certain no one had forgotten who her father was. She expected that they would recall that before she became Lady Lavinia Crawford, she was Lavinia Bredon, the daughter of the Earl of Fitzwilliam.

"The ball will be thrown in a fortnight's time. We shall begin preparations immediately."

Lavinia barely acknowledged her words. She simply stared at the empty plate before her. She was most uncomfortable with the idea, but of course she had no say in any matter at all. Her mother made

decisions for her.

She stood up, curtsied without looking anyone in the eye, and walked out of the dining room, heading to the garden. She heard footsteps behind her, hurried footsteps, but she did not turn to see who it was.

Once she was outside, she turned abruptly, expecting to face her mother, but was surprised when she saw Colin facing her, his hands up in apology. She scoffed. Of course, it was him. Her mother would never notice her distress. "You seem prepared to attack."

"And you seem ready for it," she said in return.

"You left abruptly."

"I was unaware it was that obvious," she retorted.

He put his hands down and pressed his lips in a thin line. Her features softened. She was being hard on him and this was no fault of his.

"I do not like the idea of a debut ball," she said, and hoped he understood that her confession was her way of apologizing for snapping at him.

He stuck his hands in the pocket of his breeches and said, "Ah... I see. But why would an eligible young lady resent her debut?"

She shrugged. "Because I do not want it. What really is the use of a coming out ball?"

"Your mother wants you to find a suitor, of course."

Lavinia sighed.

"Do you not want a suitor?"

Lavinia looked at him for a moment, then she turned and walked off. "Why were you away for five years?"

"I was traveling the world."

She turned to him. "What were you doing while you traveled the

world?"

He smiled. "Painting."

Lavinia remembered that he had had some interest in painting. She took off her shoes and walked into the garden.

"Now that is inappropriate," he said.

She ignored him and signaled to a maid. "Get me a quilt," she called loudly.

"It is improper for you to shout in such manner. You should have waited for her to come to you to receive instructions. I am surprised your mother never taught you any of this."

Lavinia placed her hands on her waist and said to him. "I think you should practice your painting while we have these lessons."

He folded his arms and stared at her head on. "Lavinia, that would be... unacceptable. Shall we sit and begin our lessons?"

"Rebecca is getting a quilt."

"It matters not. Put your shoes back on."

Lavinia stared at him, he stared at her in return. She sighed. She did not need to be so hard on him. It was not his fault that her mother had made him her tutor. The best thing for her to do was to accept it. Perhaps the sooner they began, the sooner it would all be over.

Lavinia put on her shoes, while she did this, she thought she saw Colin smile. When she was done, he nodded towards the courtyard beyond.

They walked quietly.



"A proper Lady of the ton should never slouch when she walks, Lavinia. You should be more aware of how you walk. Chin up, shoulders straight."

Then he smiled. "Perhaps you will try it now?"

Lavinia sighed. It was not as if she had a choice. She stood up from the bench where she was seated and began to walk. Just as she did this, the Duchess made her way over to them, her eyes squinted. She smiled as she approached them. Lavinia clenched her teeth and looked away.

"No. Your shoulders, Lavinia," Colin said, still seated.

"I've already been taught all of this," she griped.

"So then why aren't you using any of it?" he shot back. "A gentleman looking for a bride will not be impressed by slouching."

Lavinia stopped, she raised her shoulders and resumed her walk.

"And your chin."

She tilted her chin up and looked straight ahead.

The Duchess finally approached them. "Lavinia darling, I am very happy to see you both out here, these lessons will be so good for you," she said, and then turned to Colin. "Thank you for accepting to do this, dear."

Colin nodded and returned his attention to Lavinia. The Duchess sighed. "Well, I have my own matters to attend to. I shall see you when you are done."

Not waiting for a response, the Duchess walked away. Lavinia sighed. She tilted her head and stared at Colin. "So, how well did I do?"

"You must learn to look away or look down when a gentleman looks at you. It is not proper to keep eye contact so much," Colin said, rising.

Lavinia creased her brows. "Why can I not look at you?"

"You are a *Lady*. You are the chased. You must let the suitor come after you. By looking away, you are doing that." He stood opposite her. "Here, let us try."

Lavinia did as asked. When she looked up, she saw that he was staring at her. She was suddenly lost in his blue eyes, too lost, she could not look away.

Colin, amused, began to chuckle. He shook his head and rubbed the sides of his face. "Lavinia, you are supposed to look away."

She blushed. "Oh. I forgot,"

He was still chuckling. He shook his head and cleared his throat.

"Alright, perhaps you would like to try again?"

Lavinia was getting tired with these lessons, but she agreed. After two more trials, she managed to not look at him for too long.

He nodded in satisfaction when she finally got the hand of it. Lavinia took a seat.

"I am quite exhausted. It takes some much concentration to control myself like this. My movements, even where I can and cannot look!" She sighed.

Colin smiled, but he said nothing. Lavinia turned to him, she was curious about him. What he had done in the past five years? She wanted him to tell her his tales of what the world was like.

Colin signaled to a maid who stood by them. He waited until she walked over to where they were seated before he gave out the instruction. "Please bring us tea and some biscuits." He was still trying to show her how to behave. She hoped he would not always be her teacher, and perhaps sometime they could simply talk.

The maid nodded and headed off.

Colin turned to Lavinia. "After tea, we should continue with some lessons before we retire for today."

Lavinia relaxed in her seat. "Tell me about France, I'd love to hear about Paris."

"Why are you interested in Paris?"

"I recall that you were very interested in it, that it was the first place you wanted to go to."

His brows raised, as though he could not believe what he was hearing. Then he said, "You remember what I had dreamt of?"

She was quiet. He sighed. "I dreamt of life in Paris too much perhaps, made wishes for myself. My dreams made the real Paris sour when I arrived and while I stayed there."

Lavinia narrowed her eyes at him. "You gave up on your dreams there?"

"No, I tried. I took my lessons and tried to sell my paintings, tried to make a name for myself, as I had planned. But perhaps the dream I dreamt for myself was not what was meant for me."

"Dreams do not come so easily, Colin. You have to be persistent. You should have waited a bit more, tried a bit harder, rather than give up."

"I did not give up. I moved on, to try somewhere else."

"Why?" she asked in a soft tone. "You love France."

"And when it did not give me what I wanted, Lavinia, I had to move on."

Her eyes searched his. France had hurt him. He did not say what it was that had hurt him in France, but she knew. She knew that something in France had broken him. So he became one who traveled the world just to find his place in it. One who hated who he had become. Perhaps it was why he had returned home, in order to find himself again.

The maid arrived with the tray of tea and biscuits. She placed it before them and left.

"Tell me about Scotland or Spain." Lavinia took up the teapot and poured them both a cup. She mixed in the correct amount of cream and sugar for him, which he accepted.

He sighed. "The Spanish are liberal. I liked Spain. I liked how they

danced. With their hands in the air, their feet tapping endlessly on the floor. They dance so fast."

Lavinia had heard of that. She imagined dancing like that at her debutante ball. Not only would her mother not be pleased, she would shake her head at her, so would everyone who attended the ball.

"What about Scotland?"

"I did not stay in Scotland for very long."

"You did not like it?"

He smiled. "*Aye lass.*"

She found herself chuckling. He laughed too.

When the laughter died, she said, "Tell me, did something happen in France?"

He smiled. "Nothing of relevance, Lavinia."

"Ah... I see."

"I do recall some places I had been to, let me tell you..."

She had taken the risk to ask him such a question, so he relented and began to tell her about his travels. As he spoke, she realized that not only did he speak about the countries, he spoke about the places he had painted, or would have, for she was almost certain that Colin had not painted again since he left Paris. He was sad about it, she was sure, and so she made a promise to herself, that she would make him paint again, for he had always loved it so much. Whatever happened in Paris was not worth him giving it up.

Chapter Four

Colin had not expected that he and Lavinia would get along so easily, so soon after he had returned following such a long absence. She was just as he remembered before he left home. Strong willed and determined. He admired all of those things about her. He had been pleased that she had asked about his travels. He had not come to expect that anyone would. That anyone cared particularly at all, why he had left, or why he had returned, but she had.

He found he could not stop thinking about her. She was a free spirit. She had been quite bothersome in the earlier years, and could still be intrusive, but he began to see her in a whole new light. In all the years he had been away, she had blossomed into a beautiful lady. He was quite certain that at her debut ball, many suitors would fall in line for her. He swallowed hard at that thought and found it did not please him.

Suddenly, his father appeared. "Colin. I am glad I have found you. I need to show you something."

Colin snapped out of his reverie, becoming conscious of where he was seated in the study, an old book of his mother's in his hand.

He turned gloomy at the sight of it. He sighed. He had come into the study to read some old books of his mothers. Most times, he liked to do things that he felt would bring him closer to her, things that he felt would help him know her or feel her presence. For he had never known her himself, she had died giving birth to him. He shuddered at the thought, that he had been the reason for her death. He felt her everywhere around him, and he wanted that, to feel her presence always. It was why he had taken to painting, to feel closer to her.

"Your mother's book?" his father asked. He took a seat on the cushion

and relaxed into it. "I presume that you are enjoying your return?"

"A lot of things have changed here, father." He set the book down. "But I am adapting as I can."

The Duke nodded. "Of course you are."

The clock before him made a sound. His brows raised. An hour had gone by. It was time for his lesson with Lavinia.

"Are you heading somewhere?" the Duke asked, clearly feeling dismissed.

Colin nodded. "Another lesson with Lavinia."

"Of course."

Colin nodded. "You wanted to show me something?"

"Yes. Yes. I wanted to bring you up to date on everything with the estate, the land holdings and the rest."

Colin creased his brows. "Is it really necessary?"

The Duke chuckled. "You are my heir. You have to know everything there is to know about the estate and the Duchy as well. One day, all of this responsibility will be yours. You have to be ready."

Colin knew that his father was right, but he felt as though he would never be ready, no matter how much he tried, but he kept his feelings to himself.

"Of course, Father."

"Go on to Lavinia. We will have our time together later."

Colin nodded. He placed the book he had been reading back in its place, and then, after inclining his head towards his father, he headed out. He let out a breath he had been holding. He always felt uneasy when with his father. They had never had a good relationship. He thought that perhaps his father blamed him for his mother's death. Colin would not blame him if he did, he knew he deserved it.

He walked out to the garden and looked around, seeking Lavinia. She was not there. He turned to a maid who stood by. "Have you seen Lady Lavinia?"

The maid shifted uncomfortably. "She waited here a while, before heading towards the stables..."

Colin nodded. He rose immediately and headed there, as he approached, he heard the horses, footsteps and laughter.

"There, boy. There." He heard Lavinia say.

Colin's eyes widened when he saw Lavinia in the stables. Her mother had said that she did things unladylike. He presumed that coming here must be one of them.

He clasped his hands behind him and cleared his throat. She seemed startled, turning so quickly that she lost her balance and stumbled. He was quick, moving forward, and he caught her just in time. His own heart pounded as he did this, trying to hold her steady. Her head resting against his arm.

Lavinia looked up at him. He wished she had not. Her hazel eyes stared into his, and he was mesmerized by them. Her lashes were long. Her eyes were beautiful. The way she stared at him, it made him feel quite nervous. He felt a shiver through his spine, and his heartbeat was faster than usual. It felt as though he needed to hold her that way, for a long time. He did not feel like letting go.

The horses neighed, and Lavinia averted her gaze, breaking whatever it was between them. She stood back on her own two feet and leaned away from him. She looked at him briefly, before looking away. "Thank you."

He cast his gaze away, looking at the restless horses and the stable boy, who tended to them.

"We should begin our lesson," he said simply.

She nodded. "Yes. Of course."

She waved farewell the stable boy and walked out. He followed

behind her.

"I think it is inappropriate that you go into the stables."

Lavinia shrugged. "I just like to tend to the horses."

"It is not your work to do."

"I am well aware."

She walked back to the courtyard and took a seat. She grinned when he sat opposite her. "Tell me, My Lord, what I shall be relearning today."

He chuckled softly, "Lavinia —"

She held up her hand. "Wait. I have come to the conclusion that the lessons are completely boring."

His heart fell when she said that. He creased his brows. "How so?"

"It is merely a lot of talking."

"What would you prefer, My Lady?"

Lavinia tilted her head to the side. "There must be some way to make the lessons a bit more..." she trailed off, making gesticulations with her hand. "Interesting." She stared at him and grinned again.

"And what do you have in mind?" He was intrigued.

"I thought about music, playing an instrument, the pianoforte for example - but that would also bore me. I know how to do that already. I thought about riding, reading —" She scrunched her face. "Certainly not reading."

He stifled his chuckle. The expressions she made as she spoke were exceedingly hilarious. She scrunched her lips, creased her brows, then widened her eyes. It was all too much, and probably what her mother considered unladylike, she also talked far too much.

"...so I finally arrived at a conclusion." She sighed and fluttered her

lashes. "Painting!"

He raised both his brows. "Painting?"

"Yes, yes. That. It was the best I could think of. It would not bore me. I'd be more interested in the lessons if we added painting to it. I'd learn —"

"I was never aware you had such passion for painting."

"Ah...I do. I mean, I have passion for many things. Painting is one of them."

"I see. I'll consider that, Lavinia. But now, we must proceed with the lesson for today."

"Followed by painting?"

He shook his head. "No, Lavinia."

"I think it would be a great —"

"No! Certainly not," he snapped.

"Why not painting?"

"Simply because I said so, Lavinia! There is really no need to be so insistent on this!" He immediately regretted snapping at her, when he saw her expression change, but he wanted her to understand that he could not do that. He had given up painting a long time ago. Since Paris, he had not picked up a brush. He did not deserve such a talent. Not after everything. Not at all.

"Alright," she said. Her smile was gone. She was staring at him as though he were a stranger. "Let us proceed."

He didn't like that her mood had suddenly changed. He was quiet for a bit, he wanted to apologize immediately but he wondered what use it was that if he was not going to agree to what she wanted. He sighed.

"When you walk into the ballroom, rather than grin, you must smile demurely," he began.

He proceeded with the lesson. She remained quiet throughout and did all that he asked, but made no conversation, or laughed, or any of her delightful and hilarious facial expressions.

"Like this?" she asked, as she stood to practice her smile and wave.

She stood before him, her hand in the air, moving slowly.

"You place your other hand across your stomach, while the other is up."

She did as instructed. Then raised both her brows. "Am I doing it right?"

He grinned. But she did not return it. "Perfectly," he assured her.

When the lesson was done, she rose immediately, curtsied and walked away towards the house. It felt wrong. He wanted to run after her. To explain to her why he had stopped painting, but he did not. Instead, he closed his eyes and relived the memories he wished would vanish.

Chapter Five

With the reports reaching her mother that the lessons were going well, the planning for the debut ball was all Lavinia heard about in the days that followed. The Duchess spent most of her time organizing the ballroom the way she wanted it, directing the maids on what to do, where to place the flowers, how to set the lighting.

Lavinia was most uncomfortable with all the arrangements.

"Would you prefer lilacs or roses, darling?" the Duchess asked, when she walked into Lavinia's bed chambers. Lavinia glanced at her but said nothing.

"Do you intend to go out like this?" the Duchess asked, walking further into the bed chamber.

Lavinia creased her brows. "How?"

"Your hair. It is unruly."

Lavinia touched her hair and turned to the mirror. The ends seemed a bit tangled, she supposed, but it really was not a bother.

"Rebecca."

"Yes, Your Grace?" Rebecca responded, bowing her head.

"Do something about Lady Lavinia's hair, at once."

While Lavinia sat and fumed over what her mother's comments, Rebecca began pulling a comb through her hair to untangle it, then, she pulled part of it back and into a bun. The loose sections around

Lavinia's face she began to curl using a curling iron that made her flinch every time it came near her.

After Rebecca curled her hair, she handed Lavinia her pearl earrings and stood aside.

"Thank you," Lavinia said.

The Duchess narrowed her eyes at her. "Lavinia."

"Yes, Mother?"

"Where are you heading today, Lavinia?"

"To the orphanage," she said, and to Rebecca. "My cloak?"

Rebecca brought it over as asked and stood aside. The Duchess walked over to Lavinia, studying her. Lavinia faced her. "Is there something you'd like to discuss, Mother?"

"Your hair looks beautiful." The Duchess touched one of the curled ringlets that framed Lavinia's face. "Lavinia. I understand that you are not pleased with the situation at hand. I understand that you do not want any of this, but you must know, that all I wish is the best for you."

Lavinia cast her gaze down. Perhaps her mother did wish the best for her, but she wished that her mother would listen to her sometimes. Most days, it felt as though her mother never cared about what Lavinia wanted for herself. It would be lovely to have a simple conversation with her, to share her true desires, however, Lavinia could not, for she knew that it would simply end in an argument. She simply smiled at the Duchess instead.

"Of course, Mother."

Then she rose and slipped on her cloak. "I must visit the children today."

"And what about your lesson with Colin?"

She swallowed. Since Colin had snapped at her for suggesting painting

during their lessons, she had avoided him. She was not ready to face him. His reaction to her mere suggestion had hurt her deeply, and he had not seemed to care that she had been hurt. She was not ready to see him or speak to him.

"It shall wait until I return."

"I presume you have informed Colin of your plans?"

Lavinia nodded slowly. The Duchess shook her head. "You did not inform him."

"I will. I shall inform him now, before I leave."

"You should have spoken to him before now. I see you are as rude as ever."

Lavinia had no plans of speaking to him, much less of telling him that she was going to the orphanage. However, it was better to not argue with her mother.

She simply said, "I will inform him now."

Lavinia inclined her head before heading out of her bedchamber. She walked down the stairs. All she needed to do was go to the stables, saddle a horse and be on her merry way, with Rebecca chaperoning her, of course. She did not want the footman, Arnold to tell the Duke and Duchess how her day went, when questioned. He never covered for her. She trusted that Rebecca knew when to do so.

Her thoughts were halted as she recalled that she was supposed to inform Colin of her change in plans before she went ahead. She snorted. She was not going to tell him. Perhaps this was a way for Colin to pay for how badly he had treated her the day prior, to leave him waiting. She grinned at the thought.

When she got to the bottom of the stairs, however, she heard him calling her name. She turned to see Colin approaching her. She swallowed hard as she watched him come toward her. He sauntered over in a black coat, black breeches and black boots, which made his snow-white shirt and cravat stand out. It did well to emphasize on his dark hair and the blue eyes and she found herself unable to look away from. When he got close enough to her, he pressed his lips in a thin

line and called her name again. "Lavinia."

She willed herself to look away. She wanted to walk around him, but she heard her mother above them. She closed her eyes and sighed. Now she had to speak to Colin. "Colin, thank goodness I found you. I had been in search of you."

He looked taken aback. "Oh?"

"Yes. I won't be available for the lesson today. I have to visit the children at the orphanage."

"Oh. I was about to inform you that I may be a bit late, I have a meeting with my father."

"Oh. Splendid for us both, then."

"Perhaps if I hadn't had this meeting, I'd have gone with you to see the orphanage?" He smiled.

She narrowed her eyes. She was about to retort when she heard her mother's voice. "What a grand idea, Colin."

The Duchess made her way down the stairs. "You could accompany her."

"He has a meeting, Mother." Lavinia sighed. "I am going with Rebecca, Mother, there is no need for any more companions surely."

"Nonsense dear, Colin will go with you." The Duchess shook her head. "Your father will understand. Is that not right Colin?"

Colin smiled. "Perhaps, if you could beg my leave?"

"Oh, please, I insist on it."

"Why are you insisting, Mother?" Lavinia asked the Duchess.

The Duchess smiled. "He can watch you. So that you do nothing out of place to disgrace this entire household."

Lavinia closed her eyes to calm her raging thoughts. She could not

believe this was happening. That her mother was even suggesting this and insulting her in this way.

"Mother..."

"I shall talk to your father, dear. You must go with Lavinia. An open carriage shall be provided."

Lavinia groaned. "I want to take a horse."

"A horse will be fine," Colin said, agreeably.

Lavinia could tell that he was enjoying this. She glared at him and walked out.

"Be good, darling," her mother called after her.

Lavinia headed out of the house, and not once did she look back to see if he was coming, but she knew that he was.



The orphanage was quiet when she got there. Miss Dorset, one of the women who ran the orphanage, came out to welcome her. She was chubby and smiled a lot, her blonde hair was often pulled up in a neat bun, and not a hair was put out of place.

"My Lady..." She curtsied to Lavinia, then waited for her to make the introduction.

Lavinia smiled. "Miss Dorset, this is Lord Grandview. My step brother."

Miss Dorset curtsied again. Colin acknowledged her with a nod and a smile.

"The children have been asking after you. They are quite persistent." She ushered them in, while casting a sideways glance at Colin.

The children were gathered in the music room, Mrs. Hardcastle, their teacher, rose at the sight of her. The children turned and they jumped up in excitement. Lavinia giggled as they surrounded her.

"Lady Lavinia!" they called as they gathered round her.

"We have missed you!"

"Where have you been?"

"Did you bring us some new books today?"

Mrs. Hardcastle spoke up. "It is best to let Lady Lavinia have some air. Come on now, take your seats."

But one girl, Rosaline, spoke up as they all calmed down again. "Is he your friend, My Lady?"

Lavinia turned back to see Colin standing by the door, watching her. He looked away immediately and smiled. She narrowed her eyes at him. He was here with her, so it was only appropriate to introduce him to everyone.

She beckoned him to come closer. "Everyone, this is Lord Grandview, my brother."

He bowed and smiled at the children. "Good day, children!"

They surrounded him, shaking his hand, bowing and curtsying to him, and asking him questions all at once. Lavinia thought it would be overwhelming for him, but he was patient with them, asking their names, smiling at them.

"I regret that I have come with nothing today, but I shall bring you all gifts, the next time I come," he promised.

The children were gladdened by this. It warmed Lavinia's heart that he made them smile.

"Would you play us some music?" Grace asked. She was a young girl of about twelve. She lost two fingers on her left hand from a fire in her home a few years back. Lavinia smiled at her and so did Colin, sweetly.

To Lavinia's utter surprise, he nodded. "Certainly."

He walked around and sat down before the pianoforte and began playing.

"May I have a word with you, My Lady?" Miss Dorset asked.

Lavinia nodded and followed her out of the room.

"Thank you so much for coming here today, and for the food you sent. I cannot appreciate you enough -"

Lavinia shook her head. "There is no need to thank me for anything."

Miss Dorset smiled. "What you do for these children —"

Lavinia wanted no more of Miss Dorset's appreciations. She placed her hands over Miss Dorset's. "Let us not speak of this, please!"

Miss Dorset smiled, and nodded.

The sound of the children clapping their hands together was heard, and Lavinia headed back to the room. Colin was standing by the door now and waving at the children. They seemed in awe of him.

Mrs. Hardcastle sat before them and clapped her hands briefly. "Alright now, may we continue with our lesson?"

They all nodded. But their attention was still partly with Colin. He had made quite an impression.

He walked out of the room toward Lavinia, smiling.

Miss Dorset smiled at him. "It seems you have made the children smile. Would you come to see them again?"

He nodded without a second thought. "Most certainly."

Lavinia said nothing. Miss Dorset excused herself and walked into a room on the left.

Lavinia was now left with Colin. He did not let silence prevail.

"Such lovely children."

"Hm." Lavinia nodded.

"It is wonderful what you do for them."

She looked up at him. He was gazing at her, a smile on his face. In his eyes, she saw pride. She felt her heart swell. She looked away immediately.

"Lavinia," he said. "I am well aware that you are furious with me."

She stopped walking and faced him.

"I apologize for my reaction to your suggestion concerning our lessons." He shook his head. "I had promised myself to never paint again after France."

"Why? What could make you stop painting?" she asked.

He sighed. "Lavinia..."

"Colin, I would understand if you tell me, but I understand as well if you do not feel the need to explain yourself to me."

He shook his head immediately. "No," he said, then paused, "let me share this with you."

She felt something deep inside her shift when he uttered those words. She nodded. "As you wish."

He blew out a breath. "Shall we sit?"

"I brought you both some tea," Miss Dorset said, startling them as she came back in. She carried a tray of tea and biscuits.

Lavinia laughed. "That is not necessary. We shall be leaving soon."

"Nonsense," she insisted, placing it on the round table not so far from them. "It would be rude of me to not to offer you some sort of refreshment."

Lavinia smiled. She took Miss Dorset's hand in hers when she approached. "Thank you," she said and squeezed gently.

Miss Dorset grinned. "Enjoy."

Lavinia and Colin took their seats as Miss Dorset left them.

"Miss Dorset likes to serve tea," Lavinia explained as she mixed in cream and sugar. "It is mandatory that visitors must take tea."

Colin laughed. "I see. As I was saying..."

Lavinia sipped her tea and nodded.

"I went to Paris because my mother loved Paris. She had visited there, once."

"Oh. I did know she was French?"

He chuckled. "No. She went there to improve her painting. Paris is a city of art after all. She had to leave, quickly, when the Revolution began."

Lavinia smiled. He sighed. "When I arrived at Paris, I wanted to improve myself, paint the same places that she had, go to where she had been, so I could feel closer to her."

Lavinia felt his sadness. He gazed steadily at the table as he spoke, his head was clouded by nostalgia. She felt for him.

"I felt good about it for a while, until I came across her paintings in Paris." He looked up. "They had been signed. I recognized her signature, from the ones I had seen at home, from the ones my father had kept. Mother had been known."

"How so?"

"In all the places I had seen her work, the galleries wondered why they never got new works from her. 'This artist is very good,' they would say. 'I wonder why she stopped painting? She would have been known all over Paris'." He looked up. "Perhaps if I had not been born, my mother would have achieved much more."

Lavinia's shoulders sagged at this. She felt his pain. She reached out and placed her hand over his. She had heard about how his mother

had died during his birth. The maids in the house gossiped a lot and she had heard of it. She had not known that it had weighed on him so much. She had not been aware of how hurt he was.

"But your mother had died so that you may live, Colin. So that you may carry on her legacy, and you have been blessed with her gift. It is not so that you could give up and blame yourself for her death." Lavinia smiled. "It is a sign, don't you see? That you found her paintings. It is a sign for you to carry on for her. Wherever she is, Colin, she is proud of who you are. And I am quite certain she has no regrets whatsoever. So why then should you?"

His eyes never left hers as she spoke. "Colin, it was fate that took you to Paris to see all of her works, so that you could carry on for her, not so you could give up."

"Lavinia..."

"Do not give up on this, Colin. You could accomplish what she was unable to. For her, and for you. You must let go of your guilt. The situation you blame yourself for, is one you had no control over, Colin. It was no fault of yours. None at all."

Colin's face softened. He stared at her, as silence fell. Lavinia could not bring herself to look away. She hoped with all her heart that Colin would not give up painting. She hoped he would no longer let a past he had no control of, haunt him like this. Although he said nothing, she felt deep down, that her words had done much more than he could let on. She hoped that for his sake, she had used the right words.

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About the Author

Lisa Campell is an American author specialising in Steamy Regency romance tales. She decided to realise her lifelong dream of becoming a writer at a relatively mature age, after an inciting event taught her that it's better late than never. Transferring the intricate storylines of her boundless imagination to ink and paper has been her passion ever since.


Her historical fiction novels have been distinguished for their intriguing plots, their well-situated characters and the attention to detail level they display.

Lisa lives in Santa Clara, California, together with her dear husband. They are the parents of two children. Before devoting herself to Regency romance, Lisa split her time between being a mother and working as a travel clerk. She now finds her youthful spirit to be revitalised every time she brings one of her stories to life.



Note from Lisa

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